

ALIENS:

Salvage Operation



By Stephen J Dutton

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With proof that the disappearance of the *USS Sulaco* and her crew were a result of the mission to LV-426, Captain Williams gathers together another force of marines to investigate that remote world. However, Weyland-Yutani has not lost interest in the aliens discovered there and the leader of their expedition is willing to go to extreme lengths to protect her operation....

Original characters created and story written by Stephen J. Dutton.
<http://thehazugfiles.uk/Index.htm>

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1.

Watching the shuttle descend out of the cloudy sky, Venice reached into her pockets and took out both a packet of cigarettes and also a lighter. She then proceeded to light one of the cigarettes and took a deep breath from it as she tightened the collar of her overcoat in an attempt to try and keep out the rain.

"I don't think there's been a single day that it hasn't pissed down since we arrived." she said when she heard the sound of one of her subordinates approaching from behind her and she turned to see a man in overalls covered in a transparent plastic poncho walking towards her, the logo of the Weyland-Yutani corporation embroidered on his breast pocket.

"The explosion screwed up the weather." the man said, "All that debris thrown up into the atmosphere—"

"Yes Ronson, I did read the Colonisation Division's report." Venice interrupted, "They're just pissed that all that time they spent trying to terraform this lump of rock has been wasted and now they need to factor in scrubbing what passes for an environment of all that radioactive fallout."

"At least it can't reach us here." Ronson replied, "It can't get past the Ilium Range. We should be grateful for small mercies."

"Small mercies? If the universe was at all merciful then that idiot Carter Burke wouldn't have screwed up so badly he got himself killed and a multimillion dollar facility destroyed. Plus that brown nosing cretin Gibbs managed to screw up his part in this operation and now we don't have a clue what happened to the eggs he was supposed to plant aboard that marine vessel. Typical men, clueless. Now it's up to me to get the company what it wants." Venice said and taking another breath from her cigarette she looked around at the research facility that had been hastily constructed from lightweight prefabricated components that barely kept out the elements on LV-426. A large antenna array towered over these, pointed skywards to enable the researchers to send their findings directly back to Earth while at the far end of the facility another, much sturdier structure was in the process of being built to safely house the experimental subjects now being delivered aboard the shuttle. However, dominating all of this was the reason for the research facility being built here in the first place, the one feature that made this particular spot on this only partially terraformed lump of silicate compounds located thirty-nine light years from Earth.

No-one knew exactly how long the derelict alien spacecraft had been here or where it had come from but Venice hoped that she would be able to provide answers to both of these questions in addition to providing Weyland-Yutani with living specimens of the life form known officially to those few individuals with the clearance to know of their existence as Xenomorph XX121. What little was known about this strange and valuable alien species suggested that it was the perfect predatory life form; fast, strong, resilient and totally hostile. Given the obvious threat that each stage of the species' life cycle posed the first thing Venice had done when she had arrived on LV-426 to establish this research facility was prohibit anyone from entering the ship and risking disturbing whatever aliens may lurk within. Instead synthetics had been used to harvest a number of the eggs from the ship's cavernous cargo hold. Most of these were to have been sent directly back to Earth, smuggled aboard the *USS Sulaco* while Venice and her team were left to study the derelict itself. However, the ship used to intercept the *Sulaco*, as well as the *Sulaco* herself had vanished and rather than risk taking the eggs back to Earth on a ship that could be connected to the company it had been decided at the highest levels of the company that Venice herself would take over the research on LV-426 with whatever resources she needed being shipped out to her there despite the cost of interstellar travel. The first shipment of equipment was being used to construct the research centre itself and with the arrival of the shuttle she now had everything she needed to proceed with her assignment. Turning back towards the landing pad she was just in time to see a row of men walking down a ramp under the watchful eyes of several commandos from the small force that Weyland-Yutani had supplied Venice with to provide her with security for her operation. Each man held the control unit for a cargo handling dolly on which was mounted a bulky stasis unit and the motors of these whined as they rolled along ahead of the men. Meanwhile another man who had not taken the precaution of donning any rain gear and was now getting soaked ran up to her. "Where do you want these ma'am?" he asked.

"The research unit isn't complete yet." Venice told him, "You'll have to put them in the main storage shed for now. But make sure you hook them up to our power net. I don't want those things failing and killing the subjects. Trust me, if I lose them right now then you and your crew are the next best candidates. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes ma'am." the man replied, nodding nervously and glancing at a nearby commando as he wondered whether she was being serious. This far from Earth people could easily vanish and never be heard from again without arousing too much suspicion.

"Good. Mister Ronson will show you the way." Venice added and as the row of men with their stasis units came past her she looked into them at the motionless forms of the cryogenically frozen but, importantly, still

living chimpanzees each one contained.

"No-one's seen General Stern in a week." Gunnery Sergeant Lawrence of the United States Colonial Marine Corps said as he entered the office on Gateway Station in Earth orbit of his company commander, Captain Williams, to find the officer sat at his desk while his assistant leant on the back of his chair and looked over his shoulder as he worked. Though she appeared to be an attractive woman in her thirties, Madison 'Maddie' Madison was in fact an android. Formerly the assistant of a colonel in the USCM, Williams had won her in a poker game and it was only when she was delivered to him that he discovered her true nature as a Hyperdyne 129-4 series pleasure model. Fortunately for Williams, Maddie still possessed the intelligence and problem solving abilities of more mundane synthetics and he was still able to use her as he had intended as his assistant in running the marine company he commanded.

"That would pretty much coincide with when our status report would have reached Earth." Williams said.

"Obviously the creep knew we'd blow the whistle on what Niro was up to aboard the *Sulaco*." Maddie added, referring to the android General Stern had ordered be sent in her place on the mission to recover the missing marine spacecraft. When it had been discovered that there was an alien aboard the ship Niro had attempted to hijack the vessel and pilot it back to Earth himself but he was caught red handed by Maddie and Harris, the synthetic of the *USS Neille*. Niro had destroyed Harris and been about to deactivate Maddie when the alien had appeared and destroyed him first.

"I still can't believe that a marine general would conspire to sabotage a mission like that." Williams said and Lawrence snorted.

"You meant the way someone obviously conspired with some company to send an entire team of marines, our comrades and friends, to their deaths?" he said, "Captain like it or not there's something rotten in the Corps."

Williams sighed.

"I know." he said, leaning back in his chair, "Which makes what we need to do now all the more difficult."

"Which is what exactly?" Lawrence asked.

"Find out what's going on on LV-four-two-six." Williams said, "We know our people went there with some corporate guy and this Ripley woman aboard the *Sulaco* and that they encountered these aliens there before the colony was destroyed. But there's still the issue of how samples of these aliens got aboard the *Sulaco*. Ripley didn't bring them aboard which can only mean that the ship was intercepted en-route back to Earth and that means someone tipped off the culprits about the flight path and gave them a way aboard the ship. That was probably General Stern but if as you say there is more corruption in the Corps then we need to be careful in deciding who to trust when I ask to take a force back to LV-four-two-six. That's the only place that the aliens on the *Sulaco* could have come from which means they had to survive the destruction of the colony."

"The ship?" Maddie commented and Williams nodded.

"The crashed alien ship described in Ripley's report is the only other place we know of that these things exist and Ripley couldn't have accessed the *Sulaco*'s weapons to destroy it. That means that it must be where the aliens we encountered came from." he said.

"Do you think that there'll still be someone there?" Maddie asked, "Wouldn't they have just grabbed the alien eggs and run?"

"You're forgetting the ship itself Maddie. That will be worth a fortune itself even if it has been wrecked. No corporation is going to pass up the opportunity to study an alien spacecraft, no matter what the risks."

Williams pointed out.

"We'll need a ship." Lawrence said.

"I know." Williams replied.

"And if there are more generals in bed with the corporations then they may not want us poking around on LV-four-two-six." Maddie added.

"You would say 'in bed' wouldn't you?" Lawrence said and Maddie stuck her tongue out at him.

"Actually I think that's something we can make work to our advantage." Williams said as he got out of his seat, "Come on Maddie we're going to go and see Brigadier General Leyton."

"Brigadier General Leyton who played golf with General Stern every weekend?" Lawrence said.

"The very same. If there's anyone who won't want us poking around in General Stern's activities, it's him." Williams replied.

"And what should I be doing while you're setting yourself up for a court martial?" Lawrence asked.

"Organising a platoon to ship out." Williams told him, "Make sure they have full kit and are ready for combat against humans and aliens. We could be facing both when we get to LV-four-two-six."

With Maddie following him Williams then strode out of his office and headed for the area of Gateway station where the highest ranking members of the USCM had their offices and they made their way to the office occupied by Brigadier General Leyton when his civilian secretary looked at them.

"Can I help you?" she asked.

"I need to see the general." Williams said, "It's urgent. It's about General Stern."

"One moment." the secretary said and rather than contact the general via the intercom on her desk she got up and walked to the nearby office door, knocking and then entering without waiting for a reply. The secretary reappeared a few seconds later and returned to her seat before smiling at Williams.

"I'm afraid that the general is unavailable." she said.

"We'll wait." Williams said and he and Maddie promptly sat down on a nearby couch.

"The general will not be available for several hours." the secretary added, obviously keen for the pair to leave.

"We'll wait." Williams repeated, "It's important that he hears everything we know about General Stern's activities. If anyone else turns up we'll explain what we're doing here."

"We know a lot." Maddie added and the secretary glared at them angrily for a moment before she got back up and went back into General Leyton's office, this time without bothering to knock.

"I don't think she likes you." Maddie commented.

"I don't think she likes either of us." Williams said.

"Don't be silly. Everybody likes me. I'm programmed to be very likeable." Maddie replied before the secretary emerged once more.

"You may go in." she said and Williams and Maddie got back up and made their way into the general's office.

"Don't bother offering the captain coffee." Brigadier General Leyton said to his secretary from behind his desk, "He won't be staying long." and then she closed the office door behind them.

"Thank you for seeing us at such short notice general." Williams said.

"Cut the crap captain." Leyton snapped at him, "What are you doing here?"

"It's about the *Sulaco's* mission to LV-four-two-six sir." Williams said, "Plus my mission to recover the *Sulaco* afterwards."

"You mean the mission in which the Aerospace Force lost the Valley Forge class attack ship *USS Neille*? Do you have any idea how angry they are about that captain?"

"I can guess general." Williams said.

"No you can't. They want answers captain."

"And I would like to give them exactly that general. I think that there is still something going on on LV-four-two-six and that General Stern was involved somehow. The order to send the *Sulaco* there came via his office."

"Now listen here captain, you don't get to go around making accusations like that." General Leyton said angrily, "General Stern-

"Is AWOL." Maddie interrupted and Leyton glared at her.

"General I'd like to take a platoon to LV-four-two-six and find out what happened to our people there. Corporal Hicks is still missing and there's a chance he's there." Williams said.

"Ha!" General Leyton exclaimed, "If you think you can march in here and expect me to give you a ship to-

"We could always stay here and look into General Stern's dealings more closely if you'd rather sir." Williams said before Leyton could finish his sentence, "He may have disappeared but we can still examine his communications history and I'm sure that the Judge Advocate General's office will be willing to let us look into his affairs outside the Corps. Of course I'll keep the Aerospace Force in the loop as well so that they can see how seriously we take the loss of the *Neille*."

Brigadier General Leyton turned to the computer terminal on his desk and quickly entered a few basic commands.

"The *Almayer* is on seventy-two hour readiness." he said, "But I want a copy of your flight plan on my desk in twelve hours. If I don't have that then you're going nowhere."

"Of course general." Williams responded, smiling, "I knew I could count on you." and he stood up to leave, followed by Maddie.

After leaving the office Maddie noticed that Williams was repeatedly looking back over his shoulder and she too glanced back the way they had come.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Just making sure we aren't being followed." Williams told her and she frowned.

"Why? The general backed down when you suggested that we'd be poking around in General Stern's affairs if he didn't. I thought that was what you wanted."

"It was, but I'm also guessing that Brigadier General Leyton will now be letting the same people General Stern was dealing with about our mission." Williams said and then he halted outside an elevator, "Maddie I want you to head for the docks. Locate the *Almayer* and make sure that its systems are in proper working order. Pay close attention to the life support systems. That's where I'd sabotage a ship to get rid of the crew without sacrificing the ship itself."

"Do you really think someone would try that?" Maddie said and Williams nodded.

"After what General Stern did, yes unfortunately I do. General Leyton wants our flight plan and one reason for that could be that he needs to know where to have a ship standing by to board the *Almayer* and recover

it. He doesn't want to lose another ship so he'll have to have a plan for getting her back.”

Maddie nodded.

“Okay I'll keep an eye on her. No-one will get near her without me noticing them. I promise.” she said and then she kissed him on the cheek before heading away from the elevator towards the docks where the USCM vessels were located.

Williams found Lawrence not far from the docks overseeing a platoon of marines as they prepared their equipment to be loaded onto the *Almayer*. A pair of massive cargo transports each carried a UD-4L Cheyenne dropship with their weapons pods folded away for transit while a pair of M577 wheeled armoured personnel carriers were being driven out of the main vehicle garage and forklifts were being used to stack equipment containers before they could be loaded aboard the *Almayer*. Lawrence himself was in the company of a marine sergeant major that Williams knew well enough to know that he and Lawrence were friends, though the officer knew little about the man personally.

“Sergeant Lawrence, how are the preparations going?” he asked.

“We're doubling up on the usual quantities of flame units and phased plasma guns. From our experience aboard the *Sulaco* fire and plasma are probably the safest way of dealing with those creatures safely.”

Lawrence answered, “We haven't started loading anything yet though. Sergeant Major Castle has only just told me that we've been assigned the *Almayer*.” and the other sergeant nodded in agreement.

“That was quick.” Williams said, “Maddie and I only left the general's office a few minutes ago.”

“Brigadier General Leyton appears to be in a hurry to get rid of you.” Castle said and he held up the tablet computer he held, “You've been given priority on loading.”

“Sergeant major could I ask you to oversee the loading? I need to speak with my flight crew.” Williams said and Castle nodded.

“You can count on me captain.” he said.

“Thank you. Sergeant Lawrence, please summon our flight crew to the *Almayer*. You're with me.” Williams added and Lawrence turned to face the platoon of marines working to remove the bulky equipment containers from storage.

“Kent! Midland! Dunham! Sanders!” he yelled at them, “Fall in for briefing.” and the four marines who wore flight suits rather than combat fatigues came rushing over and formed a line. When the platoon reached its destination these four marines, three men and one woman, would pilot the two dropships but before then they would form the flight crew of the *Almayer* under Williams' direct command.

“We've been assigned to the *USS Almayer*.” Williams told them, “I want us all over there now for a pre-flight briefing.”

“We haven't even started loading yet sir.” Sergeant Kent pointed out.

“Yes, I understand that but there's a lot to be done before we leave. Sergeant Major Castle will make sure that everything is loaded properly while you four come with me.”

2.

Removed from the stasis tubes, the forty chimpanzees had each been placed in an individual holding pen. The pens were arranged in two rows that faced one another, their front walls constructed from armoured glass that Venice had been assured by Weyland-Yutani's chemicals division was proof against all known corrosives. Meanwhile the other three walls of each pen in addition to the floor and ceiling was made from two metre thick concrete reinforced with layers of steel mesh coated in gold for a combination of structural strength and resistance to corrosives. Access to each pen was via one of three ways. Firstly there was a door set into the front wall of each that was made from the same transparent material as the wall surrounding it and this was how the chimpanzees had been taken into the pens while still sedated after being removed from stasis. The second way in was through a smaller hatch set into the ceiling four metres above the floor, well above the height that any of the chimpanzees could reach even using any of the objects placed in their pens to keep them occupied. These hatches were the means by which food was being delivered to the chimps, simply being dropped through the hatch to the floor below where the animal could recover and eat it at its leisure. The critical way in or out of the pens was located along the back wall, however. Here a plain looking door that was not made from any exotic or expensive material had been set into the wall. It's only purpose was to prevent the caged chimpanzees from reaching the tiny chambers that lay on the other side. Venice stood in the monitoring station looking at a wall dominated by display screens, each one showing footage from a camera being used to monitor the pens. Three cameras were trained on each pen, two in the hallway between them that pointed through the transparent front walls at different angles and a third one set into the very centre of the ceiling and pointing straight down. The combined feeds from each of these gave Venice a full view of everything happening inside the pens.

"Miss Venice we're ready to proceed." a scientist with a name badge that read 'Oliver' told Venice as she stubbed out a cigarette on the edge of the console in front of her. Then rather than respond to the man she reached into her pockets and took out the pack of cigarettes and her lighter, placing another cigarette in her mouth, "Miss Venice do you-"

"I heard you." Venice interrupted, "A few more seconds won't make any difference in the long run. So all the animals are ready then are they?"

"Yes, all of them appear content in their surroundings and they've been fed."

"Good. Then we'll proceed with the next stage of the operation. Enable pen number one."

"Just pen number one?" Oliver asked and Venice glared at him, blowing smoke in his direction that made him blink and then cough.

"Yes, just pen number one for now. I want to give this my full attention so we'll go one pen at a time. Then once we've got a better idea of how the chimps will react we'll finish off all those that are left in one go. Do you understand doctor?" she said sternly.

"Yes Miss Venice." he replied before turning towards a nearby technician, "Enable pen one." he said.

Watching the monitors that showed pen one, Venice smiled as the plain door at the rear of the pen slid open to reveal a leathery object just under a metre in height and rounded at the sides.

As soon as the door slid open the chimpanzee held in the pen turned to look towards the opening and immediately saw the newly revealed egg. Curious, the animal moved towards the egg until all of a sudden there was a scrabbling sound from within as something began to move and the chimpanzee came to a halt. It was then that the top of the egg peeled itself open, splitting into four segments that unfolded and as if sensing that something was not right the chimp retreated and began to screech, a noise that the animals being held in the other cells began to copy.

All of a sudden the creature contained inside the egg leapt out, unfolding its spidery legs and uncurling its long tail as it flew through the air and landed about half way between the egg and the chimpanzee before it immediately began to scuttle towards the now panicking animal. In response the chimpanzee leapt up and down, continuing to emit screeching noises. It grabbed whatever it could and hurled them at the running facehugger before the alien creature leapt up at the chimpanzee and spread out its legs so it could use them to secure itself to the front of the animal's head. It took just moments for the legs of the facehugger to grab onto the chimpanzee and the long tail wrap itself tightly around its neck. Then the tubular ovipositor emerged from the facehugger's underside and forced its way into the mouth of the chimpanzee, extending down the terrified animal's throat. The chimpanzee briefly tried to rip the facehugger away but the alien was already excreting a toxin that paralysed the animal before it lost consciousness and collapsed onto the floor of the pen while the chimpanzees held in the other pens continued to screech loudly.

"Incredible." Venice said after watching the chimpanzee subdued by the facehugger, "I mean I read the reports but I never imaged how impressive seeing that in person would be."

"Shall we proceed with the other pens now Miss Venice?" Oliver asked.

"No. Let's wait and see how long the process takes first. Get that chimp into a scanner so we can watch the implantation process and the growth of the embryo. There's no need to get that chimp back into its pen before the facehugger detaches itself and I don't want us to miss anything." Venice said before blowing another small plume of smoke towards the scientist.

The *USS Almayer* was a Conestoga-class transport ship, identical to the *Sulaco* that had carried the marine unit commanded by Lieutenant Gorman on their ill-fated mission to LV-426. Regardless of what had happened to the marines on that mission, the *Sulaco* herself had survived intact and Williams was confident that the moderately well armed *Almayer* was suitable for the mission at hand.

The ship was commanded from a compact control centre buried deep within the ship. In theory the vessel could fly itself simply by telling it where it needed to go but in practice a human crew made operation more efficient in terms of being able to adjust to a rapidly changing situation and dealing with unexpected events. Maddie was already present in the bridge when the marines arrived and Williams frowned when he saw her using the computer terminal she was sat at to look at civilian online shopping catalogues.

"Maddie I thought I asked you to keep an eye on the ship." Williams said when he saw this.

"I am." she replied, "The computer will alert me if anyone comes aboard just like it did when you came through air lock number two on the port side four minutes ago. In the mean time I thought I'd take the opportunity to find myself a new nightdress. Look, you should buy me this." and she leant aside so that Williams could see the computer screen and pointed at the image of a woman in a short nightdress shown on it.

"Maddie I'm not buying you a new nightdress." Williams said as the other male marines also peered at the image while Corporal Sanders, the sole female marine present just sighed.

"Fine." Maddie said as she turned her chair around, "If you want me to sleep naked, I'll sleep naked."

"Let's just get on with this." Williams said and the marines sat down at the vacant control stations, all looking at him, "I don't know how much Gunnery Sergeant Lawrence has told you so I'll start at the beginning. We're heading for LV-four-two-six in the Zeta Two Reticuli system and I need a course plotting in about eleven hours so I can file it with Brigadier General Leyton."

"That's easy enough." Dunham said, "The ship can figure all that out by itself."

"I want a special course plotting." Williams said, "It has to look good for a stealthy approach to the system but there's something more that needs adding. Something that I won't be filing with the general."

Oliver knocked on the door of Venice's quarters hurriedly and then burst into the room. Venice had just been getting out of the shower and had a robe wrapped around her.

"What the hell?" she exclaimed as she made sure her robe was secure, "What do you think you're doing?"

"I'm sorry, I couldn't raise you on the intercom." Oliver replied, "It's starting."

"Move!" Venice snapped, scooping up the cigarette packet and lighter from the table beside her bed as she rushed towards the doorway Oliver was still blocking and she pushed him back out of the room. The pair ran along the corridor and up the flight of stairs leading to the command centre where a crowd was now gathering around the monitors showing the holding pens.

"You're just in time." the technician sat at the console in front of the monitors said as Venice came to a halt behind him and immediately lit up a cigarette.

"When did this start?" Venice asked, looking first at the monitors for pen one that showed the chimpanzee it contained lay on the floor and convulsing. Meanwhile the animals kept in the other pens were clearly agitated, jumping up and down and screeching.

"About four minutes ago." the technician said, initially just glancing at Venice then suddenly looking at her again when he realised she was wearing only a robe, "The chimp was playing with those plastic balls it seems to like when all of a sudden it stopped and just lay down and began to make weird wailing noises clutching its stomach. Then it screamed and all the other chimps went berserk."

"That's when I came for you." Oliver added.

"And I'm glad you did. Are we recording all of this?" Venice said.

"Yes, it's all going into the computer." the technician replied, "We can transmit all of this straight to Earth at any time."

"Hold off for now." Venice replied, "Let's see what we've got first."

"Miss Venice." a voice called out from across the command centre and she turned around.

"What? Can't you see I'm busy?" she snapped.

"I'm sorry ma'am but we're receiving a transmission. It's got a board of director stamp and is marked urgent."

"That transmission took a week to get here." Venice said, "Five more minutes aren't going to--"

"There!" a researcher yelled, pointing at the monitor right at the moment that the convulsing chimpanzee arched its back and blood erupted from its stomach.

"Damn! I missed it." Venice hissed and she spun back towards the monitors in time to see the chimpanzee's stomach explode outwards as something burst out, "Quick! Zoom in on that!" Venice said excitedly, leaning

over the back of the technician's chair and the technician adjusted the cameras monitoring the pen so that they focused solely on the body of the chimpanzee. The creature that was now crawling slowly out of the corpse had a snakelike appearance but with the addition of vestigial limbs close to its elongated head. "Remarkable." one of the researchers said, "To think that developed from a single cell in less than forty-eight hours. Its growth rate was phenomenal. Just think of the possibilities in terms of organ cloning." "And that's just the beginning." Venice said before taking another breath from her cigarette, "Burke was thinking small when he got into bed with the Weapons Division. Every part of the company will be after a piece of this and we'll be able to open our own banks with the bonuses we'll get." All of a sudden the chestburster raced away from the body of the chimpanzee from which it had just been born.

"Track it!" Venice snapped.

"I can't, it's gone." the technician said as the view from the cameras pulled out again.

"I don't see it." Oliver said, "We may need to send in an android."

"Don't be so stupid." Venice replied, "open that door and we'll lose containment. You saw how fast that thing moved, it'll be out of the door before even an android can grab it."

"So what do we do?" another of the researchers said.

"Leave it. It's not going anywhere. We'll keep throwing food in and the thing is bound to reappear when it gets hungry. Which if the reports are right ought to be soon. Nothing grows as quickly as this species is supposed to without getting a massive intake of calories. Now I'm going to go and put some clothes on so send that message from the board to my quarters, I'll look at it there. In the meantime I want the rest of you to start the process of impregnating the rest of the test subjects. I want four of them restrained as soon as they are immobilised though. Set things up so we can contain the chestbursters from two for study as soon as they are born. The other two subjects are to be used for trying to find a way to remove the facehugger without killing the host." Venice said, turning away from the monitors and walking towards the exit that would take her back to her quarters.

"Removing it? Why would we want to do that?" one of the researchers called out after her.

"Trust me Doctor Franz," she responded without looking back at him, "if something goes wrong and you end up with one of those things stuck to you, you'll be glad if we have way of getting it off before your chest explodes like that chimp's."

Returning to her quarters the first thing that Venice did was lock the door behind her so that she would not have anyone else barging in on her while she got dressed. Then she checked her computer terminal and saw that the message from Weyland-Yutani's board of directors had been forwarded to her just as she had requested and she quickly entered her personal identification code to unlock it. Then she turned away from the terminal, allowing the message to play in the background as she tossed her robe onto the bed and began to get dressed.

"Venice we've got a major issue." the white haired man whose image had just appeared on the computer screen began. This man was a member of Weyland-Yutani's board of directors. He was called Bridger and it was he who Venice had approached with her proposal for this expedition as soon as news had reached the company that Burke's mission to LV-426 had failed, "The marines who boarded the *Sulaco* have been digging deeper into General Stern's connections to us and there's another ship on its way to you now." Bridger continued.

"Oh you have got to be kidding me." Venice said, frowning as she paused getting dressed and she stared at the computer as the message continued.

"Fortunately the officer in command of the mission provided another of our friends in the Marine Corps with a full flight plan before departure. We have the exact time they'll slow from faster than light speeds and where they'll be when they do. Hopefully by the time this message reaches you the *Razumov* will still be in orbit. Your orders are to have the ship ambush the marine vessel as soon as it shuts off its hyperdrive and destroy it. I hope I'm being clear when I say that there must be no survivors from this at all, the board is trusting you to handle this Venice. Promise Captain Collins a bonus if you have to, I'll authorise an extra ten thousand dollars if he can deal with the marine ship but there can be no loose ends. If any of the marines do make it to the surface then feel free to either kill them outright or use them as additional test subjects. The Weapons Division wants more information on the alien's lethality against humans anyway."

"I bet they do." Venice muttered.

"The important thing is that they must never make it back to Earth. Good luck out there Venice, this is Bridger signing off."

The computer screen then went blank apart from a small message in the middle of the screen that read 'Message Ended: Purging File' and Venice knew that all evidence of the message ever having been in the system would soon be gone. With the original message file already deleted a week earlier on Earth there was now no record that it had ever been either sent or received and thus no evidence that Weyland-Yutani's board of directors had just ordered a ship belonging to the United States Colonial Marines to be destroyed with all hands. More concerning was the order to kill any of the marines that happened to survive the

destruction of their vessel long enough to reach the surface. Venice knew that she could count on the commando force she had at her disposal to kill any survivors but it was probable that the research staff would be more squeamish about such things and using marines as hosts for the aliens they were here to study would likely throw up even more objections. The only way that could work would be to arrange for the marines to be implanted with alien embryos before being brought to the research centre.

First though there was still the matter of destroying the marine starship heading for LV-426 and when Venice finished dressing she sat down at her computer and opened up the attachment to the message that had been saved rather than deleted with the message itself. As she had expected this consisted of a set of navigational data that listed the start and end points for the marine starship's faster than light journey as well as data on the vessel itself. According to this the *USS Almayer* was a Conestoga-class light assault ship and this was a worrying prospect for Venice. The *Razumov*, the starship assigned to the research mission, was little more than a civilian transport ship that had been quietly adapted to carry a battery of four missiles and a laser turret for close in defence. In comparison the *Almayer* carried twice as many missiles and laser cannons as well as rail gun turrets, mines and a powerful particle beam array.

Picking up the telephone handset from her desk Venice placed a call to the command centre.

"Is Captain Collins on the base?" she asked.

"Yes Miss Venice." the technician responded, "He's speaking with-

"I don't care." Venice interrupted, "Just have him sent to my quarters immediately. I need to speak with him on an urgent matter."

"Yes Miss Venice, right away." the technician said and Venice put the phone down, lighting up another cigarette as she waited for the *Razumov's* captain to arrive.

When she heard a knock at her door Venice was about to invite whoever was outside to come in when she remembered that the door was still locked and she got up and hurried to unlock it.

"You wanted to see me?" the man standing in the hallway outside said in a Scottish accent that Venice sometimes struggled to understand as she opened the door to him.

"Yes captain, come on in and take a seat." Venice said, stepping aside to allow him to enter her quarters.

"So what do you want?" Collins asked as he sat down.

"We're going to have uninvited guests." Venice told him, "There's a military ship on it's way here. United States Colonial Marines. I need you to destroy it. Do you have a problem with that?"

"Should I?" Collins replied, "I'm not American so shooting down one of their ships doesn't mean a thing to me."

"Actually I was more concerned about whether you think the *Razumov* is capable of taking on a warship." Venice said, "The ship on its way is Conestoga-class. She'll be carrying more weapons than-

"Look here missy," Collins interrupted, "you may know all about prodding and probing these aliens you're here to study but you don't know much about combat in space. Who's got the biggest or most guns rarely counts for anything. It's not like the films where ships zoom past one another firing off broadsides on the move. Most battles are decided with the first shot and I'm good at making sure that I always get it. Now what can you tell me about where this ship is coming from and when it will arrive?"

Venice smiled and reached out to turn the computer monitor on her desk so that Collins could see it as well.

"We've been sent a full flight plan. We've got precise times and locations." she said.

"You trust this?" Collins asked and Venice nodded.

"One hundred percent. This came from inside a source in the marines themselves." she said.

"A spy? Be careful about them. I don't trust spies, they lie too well. Still this is a good start." Collins replied.

"This spy can be relied on." Venice said, "His honesty has been bought."

"If he was that honest he wouldn't have taken your money." Collins pointed out, "Never mind though, even if these numbers aren't spot on they're good enough for a start."

"So you think you can do this captain?"

"Of course I can. According to your little spy that ship isn't going to arrive in the system for another eight days. That's plenty of time for me to get the *Razumov* out to where they'll arrive and then let the engines cool down. By the time those marines arrive we'll be a nice cool mass that's not emitting enough energy for them to see us with a missile launcher that's pointing right at them. Then we'll pop a missile at them before they get chance to have breakfast and the job will be done. Even their computer won't know that the missile is there until it's too late."

"Very good, but there can be no survivors. If any of the crew make it to the lifeboats you are to engage them as well."

"That could be trickier." Collins said, "Lifeboats are going to be thrown forwards along the ship's course when they are ejected and that'll take them out of our engagement envelope pretty fast. We might get off one or two shots at them but I can't guarantee getting any kills with them and it'll take time to power up the *Razumov's* engines and swing her around to get another go at them. If the marines do manage to get to their escape pods then they've got a fair chance of making it here."

Venice nodded.

"In that case I'll have our security prepared to deal with any survivors on the ground." she said.

"Well any EEV will be broadcasting a distress beacon that should make them easy enough for even your troops to find." Collins commented.

"Quite." Venice responded, "How long do you need to prepare?"

"Can you send that flight plan directly to the *Razumov*?"

"Of course."

"Then we can set out as soon as I get back to the ship. We'll be on station in about five days and then all we need to do is wait."

"Then you have your orders captain. Return to your ship and destroy that marine vessel."

3.

The sudden departure of the *Razumov* combined with preparations by the company commandos stationed on LV-426 to hunt down any survivors of the warship now widely known to be approaching unsettled the research staff and Venice was keen to keep them working so that they would have something to keep their minds off the approaching marine force. For the engineering staff this meant studying the derelict spacecraft as closely as possible without actually going aboard it. The presence of the alien eggs made entering the crashed vessel extremely hazardous and Venice had given orders that only androids and other robotic devices were to be permitted inside while commandos stood guard all around the ship. On the other hand for the biologists present pressed on with the process of implanting alien embryos into the remaining chimpanzees and while these were being immobilised by the facehuggers in their pens, in pen one the already hatched alien grew rapidly.

At first the alien kept out of sight, only emerging to devour the food thrown into the pen through the top hatch and the watching scientists repeatedly pondered why the growing creature ignored the body of the chimpanzee from which it had hatched as a source of food and the corpse remained where it had been when the alien had hatched. As the alien grew it became too large to hide among the objects in the holding pen and instead it took up a position squatting at the rear of the pen, apparently watching as members of the research staff walked past.

"How big is it now?" Venice asked when she entered the command centre and saw the alien crouched as if ready to pounce.

"It's approaching seven feet now." Oliver said, "According to the data that makes it about fully grown. Next we expect the carapace to become more ridged."

"But it just sits there?" Venice asked and Oliver nodded.

"It turns its head each time someone walks past the pen and hisses at them but it doesn't move." he said.

"So it understands that there's a barrier between it and them." Venice said, stubbing out her cigarette on the control console in front of her, "Come on," she told Oliver, "I want to take a look at it." and Oliver frowned.

"We can see it from here." he said.

"No, we can see images on a screen. I want to see it in person. We'll take a couple of guards if that makes you feel any safer." Venice said as she began to walk away and Oliver hesitated.

"Not really." he muttered before following her.

Two of the armoured commandos who accompanied Venice and Oliver were equipped with powerful electrical prods while the third carried a pole that ended in a snare to be used to incapacitate and restrain the alien just in case the pen proved less secure than it was supposed to be. They carried rifles as well but the alien specimen was far too valuable to simply be shot and Venice had ordered that every effort should be made to keep it alive.

From the other pens the sounds of panicking primates could be heard as the alien eggs hatched to release the facehuggers they contained but the fully grown alien seemed oblivious to this. On the other hand as Venice and her group approached pen one it turned its elongated head towards them.

"Amazing." she said, staring at the alien, "Insectoid?"

"The carapace certainly suggests insectoid traits. Of course insects aren't bipedal so it could be just as accurate to compare it to an arachnid in biological terms." Oliver replied, "Though if you look over there you'll see what's left of a layer of skin it shed. That's more reptilian in nature."

"Don't spiders shed their skins as well?" Venice asked.

"Yes. But they detach layers of their exoskeleton in a single piece, not torn up like that. Of course any comparison with any life form we've studied before now is impossible. Nothing else has a biology like this. We can't even begin to guess at what sort of environment something like this would evolve in. Assuming it evolved naturally of course."

"You think it's engineered?" Venice said.

"Possibly. Though to engineer a life form you'd still have to start with something and then we're back to never having encountered anything like this on the hundreds of worlds we've surveyed."

Venice stepped closer to the transparent barrier separating the group from the alien and lit another cigarette. Instantly the alien let out a hiss and raised itself up to its full height, enabling Venice and Oliver to see at first hand how big it was. All of a sudden the alien leapt towards the transparent barrier and slammed into it with a loud 'thud' that made both Venice and Oliver flinch while the commandos raised their prods and snare.

However, the barrier did its job and the alien moved back from it, standing with its arms spread out either side of its body and looking straight down at Venice while its long barbed tail flexed back and forth. Then the alien opened its mouth and from between the rows of long, sharp teeth what looked like a smaller mouth with its own set of fangs emerged and opened.

"Incredible." Venice said, regaining her composure.

The alien then seemed to lose interest in the humans that it was unable to reach and it bounded back towards the rear of its pen and dropped into a crouching position again only this time it faced away from the transparent barrier and the people watching from the other side. Dipping its head, the alien next began to give the impression that it was licking the rear wall of the pen despite no tongue having been visible when it exposed its inner jaws to Venice.

"What's it doing now?" Venice asked, "Is it trying to eat the wall?"

"I don't think so." Oliver said and he pointed to the wall behind the alien, "Look, you can see something there."

"What is that?" one of the commandos said.

"Resin." Venice said, a smile spreading across her face, "The report we received from the Hadley's Hope mission indicated that the aliens secreted some sort of resin that was used to cocoon victims and hold them immobile to be implanted with more alien embryos. Its starting to make a nest for itself."

It was then that another scientist escorted by commandos equipped with more electrical prods and nets appeared. Following them were a pair of androids, each one pushing one of the stasis tubes that had been used to deliver the chimpanzees to the facility.

"Excuse me Miss Venice," the scientist said, "we're here to take two of the chimps to the surgical unit."

"To try and remove the facehuggers?" Venice said and the scientist nodded at her.

"Those were your orders." he said.

"Good. Carry on." Venice replied and then she looked at Oliver, "I think we're done here. Call me when the nest is complete." she said.

As Venice was leaving the test pens she almost ran right into one of her senior research staff, an engineer called Allen.

"Mister Allen, watch where you are going." she said, blowing smoke from her cigarette in his face.

"I want access to that ship." he replied and Venice sighed.

"That again?" she said, "I've already told you that until we've cleared it of all traces of the alien creatures it's not safe for you or your team."

"You won't even let me use androids or probes to begin a technical survey. I've seen the reports from the initial structural analysis and it's clear that those eggs are confined to the lower sections. I want to access the bridge." he said.

"Yes, so your repeated requests have said and I'm telling you 'no'. I don't want you disturbing anything that could affect the eggs." Venice said.

"Then what's the point in me and my team being here at all?" Allen asked.

"To wait Mister Allen. As soon as the ship is confirmed to be clear you and your team may wander around inside it pushing whatever buttons you wish but until then the interior is under quarantine." Venice answered.

"The interior? Then what about the exterior? We can still learn a lot about the technology from the outside of the ship. Antenna lengths, exhaust port positioning and dimensions and so on." Allen said.

"Oh very well Mister Allen you may take a team out to study the outside of the alien ship. The outside only though, am I clear?"

"Crystal clear."

"Good. Because anyone who goes inside that ship before it has been cleared will not be allowed out again. The guards have orders to shoot anyone trying. Just a precaution you understand, so there better not be any little accidents that end up with any of your team falling through any overlooked holes because it won't end well for them. Now if you don't mind I have an urgent appointment in the surgical unit." Venice said before sidestepping around Allen and carrying on down the corridor.

The research facility's infirmary was located in one of the prefabricated structures, connected to the purpose built science block by a short corridor made from thick fabric stretched over a metal frame for rapid assembly. The infirmary was almost totally empty when Venice entered, with just one of the facility's androids present carrying out an inventory of equipment.

"Where is Doctor Sondergaard?" Venice asked and the female appearing android turned towards her.

"He preparing for surgery." she answered, "Shall I fetch him for you?"

"No, I'll do it myself." Venice said, heading for the surgical unit that adjoined the infirmary.

"As you wish." the android commented, returning to its work.

"Doctor, what are you doing?" Venice said when she opened the door to the surgical unit and found Sondergaard already wearing white surgical scrubs and busy cleaning his hands meticulously.

"Preparing for surgery. What else?" he responded without looking around, "Oh and you can't smoke in here. Not unless you want to blow us all up." he added.

Venice frowned, dropping her cigarette to the floor before pressing her foot down on it to extinguish it.

"You know what I want doing?" she said.

"Yes, you want me to attempt to remove a parasitic life form from one of the test subjects without killing it. The chimp that is. I've not been given any specific instructions about the parasite."

"We're calling them facehuggers." Venice commented.

"How crude. Descriptive I suppose though, from what I've read about them."

"Yes and did you see the part about how dangerous they are? What's wrong with your androids." and Venice looked at the trio of androids in the room who were also preparing for the surgery.

Sondergaard snorted.

"You aren't a qualified doctor Miss Venice. If you were then you'd know that android surgeons are all very good when carrying out procedures that have been around for centuries, amputations and transplants and so on, but when it comes to experimental surgery they're worse than useless. Their restrictions on causing harm to a patient stop them taking necessary risks and even though we're not dealing with human test subjects here androids don't have anything like the same level of intuition as a real surgeon. The androids will assist me but I'll be lead surgeon. If you're worried about me then you can have some of your guards in there with me. I'm sure that they can deal with one of those things if it gets loose."

Just then the researchers who had gone to the pens with the stasis tubes entered the infirmary, waving the androids with their stasis tubes towards the surgical unit and Sondergaard looked up.

"Ah, it looks like my patients have arrived." he said, "If you want to stay and watch Miss Venice you're welcome to but you'll have to stay in here and watch through that window. Oh and don't forget, no smoking in here. We have pressurised oxygen lines running along that wall over there."

Venice stood by the large window that looked into the surgical theatre itself and watched as the two stasis tubes containing the chimpanzees were wheeled inside. One of these was placed along a wall while the second was pushed over to the surgical table itself and opened up.

"How long is it since the creature attached itself to the test subject?" Sondergaard asked as the chimpanzee was being removed from inside it. The androids who had brought the stasis tubes to the surgery then turned to leave while the scientist who had accompanied them and the guards remained, standing well back.

"About ten to fifteen minutes." the scientist said and Sondergaard nodded.

"Good." he said, as he lifted his surgical mask over his nose and mouth. Then he put on a larger transparent mask that covered his entire face, fitting it around his forehead and he bent down to inspect the way in which the facehugger had attached itself to the chimpanzee while the surgical androids began to attach sensors to monitor the animal's life signs.

"Scalpel." he said, holding out his hand and one of the surgical androids handed him a surgical blade.

Sondergaard turned this around and gripping it by its centre he used the curved end of the handle to prod the facehugger, starting with the tail that was coiled tightly around the chimpanzee's throat and then one of the spidery limbs that was wrapped around its head, "There doesn't seem to be any reaction." he said, passing the scalpel back to the android assisting him, "Let's see what we can do about prising it off. I'll start with one of the limbs. Clamp."

The android passed Sondergaard a surgical clamp and he carefully used it to grab hold of the tip of one of the facehugger's limbs.

"No change in test subject life signs doctor." the android monitoring the data from the medical sensors said but Sondergaard paid no attention, he was only interested if there was a change. This came when Sondergaard tried to lift the limb away from the chimpanzee's head. As soon as he began to lift the limb he saw the facehugger's tail start to tighten itself around the animal's throat. Sondergaard paused, waiting to see whether this would continue and when the tail remained tight he lowered the limb partially. This produced a slight slackening of the tail but it did not return to its previous state until he released the limb entirely.

"Okay we need to do something about that tail first." Sondergaard said and he reached out for the tip of the facehugger's tail. This proved tougher to move than the limb and Sondergaard could not pull it away from the chimpanzee's neck even slightly, "Come here." he said to one of the nearby androids, "See if you can pull this away from the chimp's neck. About ten centimetres of length will do for now."

"Yes Doctor Sondergaard." the android replied and it took the grip of the surgical clamp from him and began to pull the end of the tail away from the chimpanzee's throat. Stronger than Sondergaard, the android was successful in pulling a short length of the tail away from the chimpanzee but the facehugger reacted just as it had done when the human surgeon had tried to pry loose one of its limbs and the rest of the tail tightened suddenly. Knowing that the patient was not human and having been given no instructions on how to react to any change in the facehugger's behaviour, the android continued to try and pull loose the length of tail that Sondergaard had specified and the facehugger's tail tightened even further.

"Stop!" Sondergaard called out as he watched the tail tightening still but his intervention came too late and there was a 'crack' as the pressure of the tightening tail broke the neck of the chimpanzee.

"Doctor, the test subject is-" an android began when all of the life sign monitors dropped to zero.

"I can see that!" Sondergaard snapped, "Now let's get this thing back into stasis before it can detach itself." but again his comment came too late and the facehugger suddenly uncoiled its tail and released its legs from around the dead chimpanzee. Then even as it was still retracting the flexible ovipositor used to implant the

alien embryo in a host the facehugger leapt off the dead chimpanzee towards the android now bending over it.

Taken by surprise at this, the android fell backwards, trying desperately to prevent the facehugger from gaining a grip as its tail began to wrap around the android's neck.

"Security!" Sondergaard yelled as he backed away, "Contain that specimen. Get it in one of those tubes." and he waved towards the pair of transparent armoured storage containers that had been prepared for the two facehuggers.

The armoured commandos began to close in around the struggling android, one of them pointing the long electrical prod he held towards the alien parasite while another held out a net that he intended to try and capture the creature in. As it happened the intervention of the commandos was not required. Despite not yet having fully subdued its next target, the facehugger pushed its ovipositor into the android's mouth and down his throat. At this point in the implantation procedure the facehugger would normally sense the taking in and releasing of breath of its victim but because in this case the victim was an android there was no respiration of any kind and the facehugger determined that it was not a suitable host.

Withdrawing the ovipositor, the facehugger attempted to pull away from the android but the machine was too strong and held onto the facehugger tightly.

"Doctor Sondergaard, I have it." the android called out.

"Quickly, get it contained." Sondergaard ordered and with the facehugger still thrashing its legs and tail about the android got to his feet and walked over to the nearest of the preprepared containers and dropped it inside, sealing the container before the creature could leap out.

"The container is sealed Doctor Sondergaard. I am undamaged." the android announced.

"Interesting." Sondergaard said.

"What is doctor?" Venice asked over the intercom from the adjoining room.

"This creature was able to tell the difference between a living human and a synthetic one in moments."

Sondergaard replied as he walked up to the container that now held a facehugger struggling to break free of it.

"Yes, very good. Now do you have any ideas about how to remove one from a host without snapping its neck?" Venice said.

"Well since simply pulling it free hasn't worked we'll have to try more forceful methods." Sondergaard said and he turned to the androids assisting him, "Bring me the next test subject and prepare the defibrillator." he ordered.

As the dead chimpanzee was removed the second one was being removed from its stasis tube and placed on the surgical table while a defibrillator unit was wheeled over.

"What are you planning doctor?" Venice said as he took the electrical wands from the defibrillator and watched as an android turned the device on, "Are you intending to use those on the alien or the chimp?"

"Stopping the heart of the test subject is a possibility. We saw how quickly the parasite removed itself from a host it knew to be dead but there are significant risks involved in such a procedure that I'd like to avoid if I can so I'm going to try and incapacitate the parasite itself." Sondergaard replied, "Charge to one hundred and fifty joules." he added, looking at the android beside the defibrillator.

"Charging." the android replied and Sondergaard waited for the android to indicate that the device was charged before jabbing the two wands into the facehugger's exposed back.

The sudden discharge of electricity caused the facehugger to convulse, momentarily tightening its grip on the chimpanzee before relaxing again but when Sondergaard then tried poking one of the alien's legs he found that the creature was still gripping the chimpanzee tightly.

"Well?" Venice asked.

"No change. I'll try doubling the energy to three hundred joules and see if that has any effect." Sondergaard answered.

When the defibrillator was charged Sondergaard pressed the wands against the facehugger again and the discharge caused the alien creature to convulse again.

"Doctor the tail tightens around the test subjects neck when it is shocked." the android stood by the defibrillator said, "Increasing the charge is likely to make this worse."

"Okay we'll change our tactic before we end up with another test subject with a broken neck." Sondergaard said, passing the wands back to the android, "I've heard that these things are supposed to have highly corrosive blood so a basic blade isn't going to be of any use. I'll need a bone cutting laser."

"Are you sure that's safe doctor?" Venice asked.

"It's the best I can do. A bone cutting laser cauterises flesh as it slices so that should keep the bleeding to a minimum. I'm sorry though, your parasite is about to get cut into pieces."

Venice smiled.

"That's alright." she said, "We can get thousands more if we need them."

The bone cutting laser consisted of a handheld emitter that was connected to a large battery pack via a thick coiled cable. Designed to project a high intensity beam over a very short distance the end of the emitter had

a small rod protruding from it at one edge and by pressing this to where the laser needed to be aimed it allowed the operator to make sure that it was correctly placed and at the appropriate distance. As well as the laser emitter and power pack the android brought a set of tinted goggles, designed to protect Sondergaard's eyes from the brightness of the beam.

"I'm going to amputate the tail." Sondergaard said as he removed the transparent mask just long enough to don the tinted goggles, "Hopefully with that gone we'll be able to pull the parasite up over the test subject's head. If not then I'll start cutting off legs until it can't hold on any longer." then he looked at the nearby android, "I want you to hold this thing down so it can't try and get away when I trigger the laser." he added. "Yes doctor." the android responded before reaching down and taking hold of the facehugger while it remained attached to the chimpanzee.

"Okay here goes." Sondergaard said and he bent down and pressed the aiming rod of the laser against the side of the facehugger's tail, tilting the laser so that the beam would cut horizontally and not into the chimpanzee once it burned right the way through the tail, "Firing."

Pressing the activation stud, Sondergaard fired the laser into the side of the facehugger's tail. The outer skin of the creature resisted the beam for a moment but Sondergaard held it in place until he saw the skin burn away, however the effect when the beam pierced the facehugger's skin and reached the tissue inside was not what he had expected. The beam failed to instantly cauterise the alien creature's flesh and there was a spurt of blood. Before this could exit through the wound though the heat of the laser boiled it to produce a plume of greenish gas that suddenly sprayed out over Sondergaard, the android assisting him and also the unconscious chimpanzee.

Though it felt no pain the android recoiled away from the cloud of gas and there was a sizzling sound as the synthetic skin on its arm and the side of its face exposed to the gas began to dissolve, exposing the creamy white artificial flesh beneath this and then the android staggered back as the acidic vapour continued to burn through its body.

The skin and tissue of the helpless chimpanzee were just as vulnerable to the facehugger's acidic blood and as droplets condensed and fell back down onto the animal its skin blistered and then broke open as the corrosive fluid burned into its flesh. Rapidly reaching one of the chimpanzee's major blood vessels this produced a sudden rush of ordinary red mammalian blood and in a matter of seconds the animal bled to death. However, it was the effect of the gas on Doctor Sondergaard that was most gruesome.

The vaporised blood burned through his surgical gloves in under a second and he screamed in agony as he stood up straight and held up his hands only see the ends of his fingers dissolving before his eyes. However, the corrosive blood did not finish there. A quantity of the spray had struck the transparent faceplate he wore and this cracked and splintered before crumbling entirely. Now his eyes were exposed to the acidic vapour and his screams became louder as he staggered backwards. His screams caused him to inhale deeply and in doing so he also inhaled some of the gas that then began to burn the inside of his mouth and throat causing him to spit up blood before he blacked out and collapsed in an heap.

Aware that its host was dead the facehugger retracted its ovipositor and dislodged itself from the chimpanzee, leaping from the surgical table towards the banks of monitoring equipment.

"Don't let it escape." the senior commando in the room said and the troops began to advance towards where they had seen the facehugger run, the equipment for incapacitating and restraining the creature held out in front of them.

"No!" Venice shouted over the intercom, "Forget that stuff. Just kill it."

Instantly each of the commandos dropped the non-lethal device he held to the floor and drew a sidearm as they all continued to advance.

"Up there." one of them exclaimed when he saw the facehugger climb to the top of the surgical workstation and he fired his pistol at it.

He was joined almost immediately by the other commandos and the facehugger was peppered with bullets. Each bullet produced a hole in the creature's skin though and blood spurted out from each of them. The commandos were much too far away to be affected by this but the medical workstation was a different matter and the highly corrosive fluid poured down onto it, eating through the outer casing before reaching the components inside and the workstation began to spark and smoke as components burned out. Then when the blood reached the input valve for the pressurised oxygen feed it burned through this as well and the gas began to flood into the inside of the workstation until it reached the burning components above and all of a sudden the entire operating theatre was consumed in a ball of flames that blew out the window Venice was watching through and hurled her back across the infirmary.

4.

Equipped with just a camera and a tape measure, Allen and his assistant Mayer had climbed up the scaffolding that had been erected against its hull so that they could gain access to the upper surface of the derelict alien ship. According to scans taken from a distance, the ancient vessel had shifted position since it had initially crash landed here owing to the magma flows just beneath the surface and this had caused additional damage. Given enough time the subsiding ground would have torn the structurally weakened vessel apart but for now it remained largely intact.

The continuing rain made the upper hull somewhat slippery and both of the engineers had to be careful as they made their way across it. Their first point of call was a bulge in the hull about two metres long that had some form of antenna cluster protruding from it.

"So what do you think this is?" Allen said, smiling as he extended the tape measure.

"If it's a communication antenna then it can only be short range, few hundred kilometres at most." Mayer replied. Then he grinned, "I suppose if this is a military vessel then it could be some sort of electronic warfare device for jamming incoming missiles."

"Possibly." Allen said, "At least it looks like it's complete so by taking a few measurements of the antenna length we should be able to figure out the range of operating frequencies."

Allen held the brightly colour tape measure against the antenna while Mayer pointed his camera at it and took a picture. Then he noticed what appeared to be an opening in the hull a few metres further on.

"What about that?" he said, pointing and Allen turned to see it for himself.

There were few straight lines in the design of the derelict alien ship and the opening was no different. It was circular in shape and it was partially covered by a low domed hatch that stuck up at an angle.

"A person could fit through that quite easily." Allen commented as the two men carefully made their way towards the opening, "It could be an inspection hatch or emergency exit."

"You think the crew abandoned ship through it?" Mayer asked.

"Depends on how big they are." Allen said, "Some of the reports suggest that the crew of this ship stood nine or ten feet tall. If they were proportioned the same as us then that would make getting through that gap something of a squeeze. My guess would be that this is some sort of pressure release hatch." then he crouched down beside the hole in the hull and took hold of the partially opened hatch and tried to force it to open wider, "Give me a hand with this."

Between them the two men were able to lift the hatch into a vertical position and this gave them a much better view of the opening. As far as they could tell it was at the end of a vertical shaft running deep down into the derelict starship but it was impossible for them to see the bottom even when Mayer shone the beam of his flash light directly into it. All this revealed was that the sides of the shaft had the same semi-organic appearance to them that the outer hull itself also had.

"Let's see if this tells us how deep it goes." Allen said, producing a chemical light stick from his pocket.

Activating this he held the glowing stick over the opening and looked at Mayer, "Ready?" he asked and Mayer nodded before looking at his watch. Allen then dropped the light stick, watching it fall into the darkness. The stick bounced back and fourth between opposite sides of the shaft but rather than reaching the bottom and coming to a halt it sudden disappeared from sight as it reached a bend in the shaft and vanished around it. For a few moments the glow from the light stick remained visible from around the corner but this too soon vanished.

"Fat lot of use that was." Mayer said, "We still don't know how deep this goes or where."

"No, but we could perhaps lower a camera down and-" Allen began before there was the sound of a distant explosion, "What the hell was that?" he said, looking back towards the camp and seeing smoke and flames coming from one of the prefabricated structures.

Mayer spun around to look towards the explosion for himself but as he did so he lost his footing on the slippery and irregular shaped hull. Finding himself tumbling he reached out to grab whatever he could manage to halt his fall but all he was able to reach was Allen and he dragged the other engineer down with him as he fell into the open hatchway.

Screaming in panic, both men plummeted down the shaft that rapidly went from being quite dark to pitch black. Never quite able to get a handhold on anything that could stop them from falling any further, they felt themselves falling around more than one curve in the shaft. This at least prevented them from building up too much speed as they fell and when the shaft suddenly opened out into a large chamber at the bottom of the shaft they were moving slow enough that although their impact was painful neither man suffered any significant injury.

Allen groaned as he sat up and blinked. The chemical glow stick lay on the floor close by where the two men had landed and it cast its light far enough around for Allen to see where they had ended up.

"Mayer!" he hissed, his eyes widening, "Get up. We're in trouble. Big trouble."

Mayer groaned as he picked himself up, having landed face down.

"What? Where are—" he began before too saw their surroundings, "Oh no." he said, staring at the alien eggs that were all around them.

Then there was a sound like something wet being torn and the two men watched in horror as the top of a nearby egg peeled itself open and long spindly limbs began to emerge from inside it.

When Venice's eyes flickered open she found herself lying in a bed in the infirmary.

"Ah, you're awake. Freeman will be pleased." the medic on duty said as she walked over to Venice's bedside and checked the monitors above the bed.

"Freeman? What's my health to him?" Venice asked before remembering the explosion and guessing that the head of the commando detachment had probably placed his men on high alert after it.

"Since you were rendered unconscious security has taken over." the medic replied, "Freeman has had his entire force sweeping the entire facility looking for more explosives. Everyone else has just been keeping out of their way and letting them get on with it."

"It wasn't a bomb." Venice said, sitting up and swinging her legs over the side of the bed, "The explosion was an accident. Am I free to go?"

"I'll just get the doctor." the medic responded, "Freeman as well, both will want to see you."

With Sondergaard killed in the explosion Doctor Hill was the only human doctor left at the facility and she was soon standing in front of Venice and shining a light in her eyes as Freeman entered the infirmary in his armour with a pulse rifle slung over his shoulder.

"How is she doctor?" Freeman asked, looking at Hill rather than Venice.

"I'm fine thanks." Venice replied.

"Hold still." Hill said, "You have a concussion."

"Yeah, I suppose getting hurled across the room will do that." Venice said. Then without moving her head he glanced at Freeman, "You can stand your men down now by the way. The explosion was triggered when the acidic blood from one of the alien parasites caused an electrical fire in a medical workstation and ignited the oxygen supply.

"That's a relief." Freeman said, "I was concerned that another company had been able to insert an agent into our personnel. I was one step from confining people to their quarters while not on duty."

"How long was I out for?" Venice asked.

"About two days." Hill said, "You should consider yourself lucky. Everyone inside the theatre was killed in the blast."

"Trust me I do, but what about the project?" Venice said.

"According to your man Oliver the aliens have hatched from all of the test subjects so we now have more than three dozen of them in the pens." Freeman said.

"I want to see them. Now." Venice said, "Can I leave?" she added, looking straight at Doctor Hill and she sighed.

"I suppose so. But if you notice any blurring of your vision, feel faint or feel at all unwell I want you right back here. Understood?" the doctor said and Venice nodded.

"Trust me doc, I'll be right back at the first sign of trouble. Now let me out of here so I can get dressed and get a cigarette." she said.

"I hear we have new kids." Venice said as she entered the command centre and Oliver smiled when he looked around and saw her.

"It's good to see you up and about again." he said, "With Freeman declaring himself in charge after the explosion none of the rest of us were quite sure how to react. Oh and yes, all of the aliens emerged successfully. Aside from that first test subject the oldest emerged about thirty hours ago now. Most of them look to be fully grown now."

"Do any of them look like what the reports are calling a queen?" Venice asked but Oliver shook his head.

"No, not that we know exactly what one would look like in its first few days of life but all of them look like the ordinary drones or warriors or whatever you want to call them. Hastings suggested that if we waited long enough then perhaps one of the ones we have may change into one. Of course that's just a theory. The data from the medical scanner aboard the *Sulaco's* EEV suggests that queens are born as such. On the other hand as you can see on these monitors all of them have been coating the insides of their pens with that resin. In fact that looks as if it could become a problem."

"How so?" Venice asked and Oliver pointed to one of the monitors that showed the resin applied to the wall of one of the holding pens and an alien clinging onto it.

"Well look at how that sample is holding onto the resin its coating the rear of the pen with. If it carries on like that the resin will reach the ceiling. What then? If it can bind the resin against the ceiling sufficiently to support its own weight then—"

"Then it can get to the trap door." Venice interrupted.

"Exactly and the next time we open it to drop food in the alien could escape." Oliver said, nodding.

"I think we need to consider a larger holding facility. One that gives us the chance to place more than one of the test subjects together if we want so we can study their interaction."

"It'll take some time to construct."

"That's okay, we've got all the time in the world." Venice said.

"What about that marine ship? It's just a few days away."

"Oh don't worry about that. Collins will deal with the marines. If not then perhaps we can see how much of a threat the aliens really are to a person."

Some primeval instinct told the newborn aliens not to devour the bodies of the hosts that had given them life but in the absence of other food sources aboard the derelict alien ship the corpses of Allen and Mayer were consumed by the creatures that burst from their chests even as they attempted to climb back up the shaft they had fallen down. Then leaving just the parts of the two engineers' flesh that had been contaminated by their own growth inside them the two juvenile aliens made their own way out of the ship in search of more food. Still standing less than a metre tall, the two aliens' survival instinct told them to avoid the groups of guards patrolling around the ship and they instead followed the scent of food towards the research facility's rubbish dump.

Given the still largely barren environment on LV-426 the research team had set aside a large area beside their facility to use as a landfill site. The cost of removing rubbish for recycling or proper disposal was not considered viable so far from the core of human space and so everything that was no longer considered useful was dumped here and this included a large amount of food waste that the two hungry aliens set about devouring to fuel their growth.

The lights in the *Almayer's* hypersleep chamber came on before the revival process began for its crew. However, most of the stasis units remained sealed as the tops of just seven rose up as their occupants slowly began to come round.

Maddie was the first to emerge, her android systems reactivating before the living crew had the chance to wake up and she instantly rushed to the unit that held Williams inside it. There she leaned over him and kissed him until his eyes woke up and he grabbed her to push her off him.

"Maddie do you have to keep doing that?" he asked as he sat up.

"Well if you'd let me sleep in the same tube as you I wouldn't have to. I could just hold you for thirty light years instead." she replied.

"If that stasis tube starts rocking I'm not knocking." Lawrence commented as he climbed out of the adjacent stasis unit. Meanwhile the platoon's flight crews were also starting to stir while the rest of the marines slept on in their stasis units, oblivious to the passage of time."

"This feels weird." Dunham said rocking as he stood up.

"It because we're still travelling faster than light. It screws with your insides." Sanders replied and Dunham looked at his co-pilot.

"Okay smart ass." he told her, "Now tell me how far we are from getting where we're going."

"That's a good question." Lawrence added.

"Yes it is." Williams agreed, "Maddie could you go and check the navigational systems while we have breakfast."

"Sure." she replied, planting a kiss on him before dashing towards the exit from the hypersleep compartment, "But put some clothes on first. I don't want you running around in your underwear the whole time."

"Sorry, didn't mean to get you excited before breakfast." Maddie said before she got dressed along with the marine flight crew and then headed for the *Almayer's* bridge.

When she returned from the bridge she found the marines sat around a table eating the food assembled from basic processed nutrients into what the makers claimed were realistic imitations of natural foodstuffs that had the benefit of not spoiling during long space flights.

"Okay so who wants the good news?" she asked, standing at the end of the table and smiling at the marines.

"I'm guessing that means we're on target." Lawrence said.

"Bang on." Maddie said, "We're about half a light year from where we told Brigadier General Leyton we'd be dropping to sub light speed."

"And the computer will shut off the hyperdrive short of that?" Williams asked and Maddie nodded.

"About sixty million kilometres short. Anyone hoping to catch us before we can recover from hypersleep is going to be sorely disappointed."

"I told you my numbers were good." Kent commented, looking at the other three flight crew.

"We're about sixteen hours real time from where we'll come out of faster than light. But we'll experience that as about four days."

"Okay." Williams said, nodding, "I want to keep the bridge manned during that time. We'll work in pairs taking

four hour watches and then eight hours off. Sergeant Lawrence you'll stand watch with me, Kent and Midland will work together and so will Dunham and Sanders. I suggest that you use some of your off hours to prepare the dropships for use so we'll have a head start on it when we reach LV Four-Two-Six."

"What about me?" Maddie asked.

"Just fill in wherever you think is necessary." Williams said, "Do you think you can do that?"

"Sure." Maddie replied, smiling, "For the next four days you're going to have nothing to do aboard this ship except me."

"You walked right into that one." Lawrence commented.

5.

"Captain Collins to the bridge." a voice announced over the intercom and Collins dropped the fork he was holding and left his tray of food on the table as he rushed to the bridge. Here he found the three crewmen who were on watch at that point in the day.

"Have you found that marine corps ship?" he asked.

"Yes sir, the *USS Almayer*, but she's not where she's supposed to be." one of the flight crew answered."

"Show me." Collins said. All of the *Razumov's* operations, including combat, could be handled by the ship's computer but given the importance of his assignment Collins did not want to have to rely on a machine to destroy the approaching marine vessel that also possessed a computer advanced enough to undertake space combat and that would be able to counter whatever strategy the *Razumov's* computer came up with. Collins knew that even though the crew of the *Almayer* suspected an ambush they still did not know where his ship was and because of that he still had the element of surprise on his side.

"She's here, about half a million kilometres further out than she should be if she's moving at sub light speed."

"Ah," Collins said, smiling, "very clever. They must have suspected that someone would pass their flightpath on to so they shut off their hyperdrive early. Now they're trying to sneak into the system without being seen. What are their emissions like?"

"Minimal captain. They're trying to run silent and haven't lit up any of their active systems. We can only see them because their reactor's still running hot from the hyperdrive."

"So they haven't seen us yet then." Collins said, "I want a firing solution plotted on that ship right now. Set the missile for preliminary guidance using passive infrared only."

"No ranging pulse captain?" one of the crew asked and Collins scowled.

"Do you think I'm stupid?" he snapped, "One active sensor pulse is all it will take for them to realise that we're here and at this range they'll be able to out turn the missile easily. No, we won't confirm the range with radar or lidar. The first thing I want that ship to see is the terminal guidance check from the missile. By that time it will be too late for their computer to do anything but sound an abandon ship alert."

"Calculating firing solution now captain." another crewman said and then several seconds later as the *Razumov's* computer provided the targeting information for the missile launch given Collins' requirements he added, "The enemy vessel will enter our optimum engagement cone in two minutes. Though we could attempt to adjust our facing to put them in it now. In either case it will remain in our field of fire for twenty-five seconds."

Although in theory starships could turn to face in any direction at will and missiles could turn to follow them the laws of physics regarding inertia and conservation of energy meant that space combat generally took place in straight lines. A ship wanting to turn around first had to shed all of its forward momentum and although that could be achieved with relative ease by making a gravity assisted turn around a planet or other large body in space out here in open space it could only be achieved by decelerating using a ship's engines. The same rules applied to missiles and the amount of fuel needed to be burned for a missile to be able to turn more than a few degrees while maintaining a velocity high enough for an interception was prohibitively high.

"No. Even the gas from a manoeuvring thruster could give us away if they're looking in this direction. We can afford to wait. Prepare missile number one for launch on my command." Collins ordered.

"Yes captain." the crewman said. Then as the time went by he counted down how long was remaining until the *Almayer* entered the region of space ahead of the *Razumov* where its missiles would stand the best chance of scoring a first shot hit.

"Ninety seconds."

"Sixty seconds."

"Thirty seconds."

"Twenty seconds."

"Ten seconds. Nine. Eight. Seven. Six. Five. Four. Three. Two. One. Captain the enemy vessel is-"

"Launch missile." Collins commanded without giving the crewman the chance to finish his sentence and waste valuable time while the *Almayer* was in the correct position to be attacked.

With the missile already prepared for launch, the crewman's finger was already hovering over the button that would launch it and it took just a fraction of a second for him to press it.

"Missile away. Captain we still have more than twenty seconds while the enemy vessel is in our optimum engagement arc. Do you want me to launch a second missile?" he reported and Collins leant back in his chair, smiling.

"No, if one doesn't do the trick then either the ship will still be crippled and we can finish it off at our leisure or it will have intercepted or avoided the missile and be ready for a second one. Let's just watch what that one

does." he said.

"I've got a thermal bloom, not much but it could something." Midland reported. Now that the *Almayer* was entering the Zeta (2) Reticuli system all of the marines who had been woken early from hypersleep were in the bridge manning the control stations while Williams sat in the central command seat.

"Let me see." he said, turning his chair around.

"I see it." Maddie added, "Looks like it could be the exhaust from a missile fired at a slightly oblique angle. It's heading this way. Just as you expected."

"Should I activate our defences?" Lawrence asked but Williams shook his head.

"No, let's not let them see that we've seen their missile." he said, "Besides that's all we've seen yet. I don't want to do anything until we know where their ship is."

"The missile could have been a booby trap." Dunham suggested, "Left out here until we tripped its sensors."

"In that case I'd expect more than one." Williams said.

"Missile still closing. Estimated time until impact four minutes." Maddie said.

"Still no signs of the launching ship captain." Sanders added, "They're obviously running silent as well."

"But they'll have had days to get their engines to cool down." Lawrence commented.

"Three minutes to impact. Still no reaction from the *Almayer*." the crewman who had fired the missile said.

"Then they haven't spotted it yet. If they had then they'd be lighting up their active sensors to search for us and give their close in defences a better chance of shooting down that missile."

"Two minutes to impact, still no sign of the enemy ship." Maddie said.

"That captain is confident to have only launched that one missile." Lawrence added.

"They're waiting to see what it does." Williams said, "If it does what they want then they'll either turn back for LV Four-Two-Six or move in to finish us off. On the other hand if it fails they'll stay put and hope that we don't see them."

"One minute." Maddie said as the time continued to count down.

"Here it comes. That search radar should light up soon." Lawrence said.

"And then we'll find out if my plan was as brilliant as I thought." Williams replied.

"Thirty seconds." Maddie said, "Still no other contacts and no active tracking from the – wait, no, the missile just lit up its radar. It's locked on."

"There's the engine flare." the crewman said when the heat from the missile igniting its second stage engine for the final portion of its journey appeared on the *Razumov's* passive infrared sensors.

"What about the *Almayer*, what are they doing?" Collins asked.

"Nothing captain." the crewman replied, "Still no active sensor scans and no signs of countermeasures."

"But they must have seen the missile by now." another added.

"Yes they should." Collins said, "They must be waiting until the last possible moment to do anything so the missile won't have the time to decide what it needs to do."

"Ten seconds to impact." Maddie said, "Nine. Eight. Seven. Six."

"Get ready for the bang." Lawrence said as Maddie continued to count down."

"Five. Four. Three. Two."

"One. Impact!" the crewman exclaimed.

"What about the ship? What happened to it?" Collins said.

"Still waiting for sensors to clear after the explosion. We've got a massive thermal signature from the blast and it looks like we have debris. Captain I think we got them."

"One shot, one kill." another crewman said, grinning.

"Let's give it a few more seconds before we celebrate." Collins said.

"The computer's sorted out the clutter from the debris captain. There's nothing left of the *Almayer*. We must have hit them dead on."

"There'll be little pieces of them scatter over millions of kilometres before long." another crewman added.

"Okay we've wasted enough time here." Collins said, "Let Venice know that we've taken out the marines and are on our way back. Then lay in a course for Acheron orbit and take us there."

"Decoy drone destroyed captain." Sanders announced in the *Almayer's* bridge.

"Destroyed? Pulverised more like." Maddie commented, "That missile scored a direct hit."

"Any response from the enemy vessel yet?" Williams asked.

"Nothing I can detect." Maddie replied, "Wherever they are they're staying dark."

"So either they're running a damage assessment or they already know they shot down a drone and are trying

to find us." Lawrence said.

"Wait!" Maddie snapped, "I think I've got them. I'm picking up a thermal distortion from a manoeuvring thruster."

"Turning towards us?" Midland asked but Maddie shook her head.

"No, away I think. Wait, yes, there it is. Heat flare big one. They just lit up their main drive, accelerating at a nice fuel conserving point two five gee."

"They're heading back to LV-426." Williams said, "How long until we're inside the shadow of their drive trail?"

"About forty seconds captain." Dunham replied.

"Good. As soon as we're hidden in their own engine flare I want you to take us to one gee acceleration and line us up right behind them. Sergeant Lawrence I want a firing solution plotting for a single ASAT missile launch." Williams ordered and Lawrence nodded.

Meanwhile Dunham watched the relative position of the *Almayer* to the withdrawing hostile vessel and as soon as the marine vessel was hidden from the enemy ship's sensors by the energy output of its own drive he engaged the *Almayer's* own sub light engines and it began to accelerate after the enemy ship, steadily closing the gap between them.

"Engines firing captain." he reported.

"Any reaction?" Williams said.

"Enemy ship still burning at point two five gee." Maddie said.

"Firing solution plotted." Lawrence added, "We'll be in optimum position in thirty seconds."

"Arm missiles. Stand by to fire." Williams said.

"Safeties off, missile number one armed." Kent announced, his finger hovering over the final firing button for the *Almayer's* missile system.

"In position now." Maddie reported.

"Fire." Williams ordered and Kent pressed the button. In an instant one of the *Almayer's* Long Lance missiles was deployed from the launching bay and then moments later its first stage engine activated and the missile accelerated rapidly away from the ship. This lasted for just four seconds before the missile began to coast, already moving much faster than either the *Almayer* or *Razumov* as it hurtled towards the latter.

"Missile running true." Lawrence said.

"Still no sign of any reaction from the target." Maddie added and Williams smiled.

"Then we've got them." he said, "They think we're already dead."

"Something they'll be experiencing soon." Dunham commented.

"Missile approaching terminal guidance stage." Kent said.

"This is it. They'll know we're here then." Maddie said.

An alarm sounded in the *Razumov's* bridge.

"Radar warning captain. Someone just lit us up with their radar." one of the crewmen called out.

"Bearing?" Collins responded.

"Directly astern captain."

"Those damned marines used a decoy!" Collins exclaimed, "Go to active tracking."

"Confirmed captain, missile closing from astern. It's locked on and is in its terminal phase."

"Arm laser cannon and deploy countermeasures." Collins ordered, "Helm take evasive-"

"Too late!" another crewman called out right before the missile exploded.

The fragments from the exploding missile were propelled forwards, directly into the *Razumov's* rocket engine and the ship's entire drive section was ripped apart in a ball of flame. The ship's fusion reactor, located directly forwards of the drive section was caught up in this blast and the system went into emergency shut down before the plasma could spill out in an uncontrolled fashion. This left the forward section of the ship drifting through space while burning debris tumbled through space behind it.

"She's crippled." Lawrence said.

"But still dangerous if they have any more missiles." Williams said, "Corporal Dunham roll us off their axis a safe distance and take us past them. Midland stand by on rail guns, fire as we pass them. Sanders be ready with the laser cannons just in case they take another shot at us."

Moving out from directly behind the *Razumov*, the *Almayer* was free to accelerate without risking flying into the debris resulting from the missile detonation and it rapidly caught up with the crippled ship. When the distance between them dropped below twenty kilometres there had still been no reaction from the *Razumov* and Midland fired both of the *Almayer's* rail gun turrets together. Each twin mounted weapon fired pairs of projectiles travelling at a dozen kilometres per second. With the *Razumov* unable to change its course or speed the already crippled vessel was an easy target and all of the rail gun rounds hit their target. No protective armour existed that could stop such fast moving rounds from punching rows of holes right through the ship's hull before smashing their way through the entire ship and emerging on the far side. Rather than using just the basic kinetic energy penetrating rounds carried in the *Almayer's* magazine, Midland opted to

alternate these with the rail guns' incendiary rounds. These converted to plasma after piercing the *Razumov's* hull and producing brief plums of flame from the entry and exit points that died as bulkheads dropped into place to seal off damaged sections and the oxygen already within them was consumed. Midland continued to fire the rail guns until the *Almayer* had flown right past the *Razumov*, leaving behind it nothing but a charred and lifeless wreck.

"Target destroyed captain." he said with a smile.

"Were they able to warn anyone about us?" Williams asked.

"I didn't monitor any transmissions from them at any point." Maddie answered.

"Good. Then maybe whoever's down there on LV Four-Two-Six will think that we're their own ship coming back. Navigation I want a course plotting. Take us into orbit on a lean burn. Point two-five gee." Williams said.

"Just like their own ship." Lawrence added.

6.

"Holy cow this stuff stinks. Even with the mask on." the worker said, ripping the respirator from his face as he and another worker unloaded the bags of trash from the open topped electric cart they had used to transport it to the landfill site.

"I'd put that mask back on if I were you." his comrade said, his voice muffled slightly by his own respirator.

"Oh all that toxic craps way over there in the bunker."

"Maybe but do you trust the company to spring for decent seals on the canisters? Who knows what you're breathing in right now?"

"At least I can breath properly without the mask." the first worker said as he kicked at the trash near his feet.

"Don't do that." the other said.

"Why not? Worried I'll make a mess or break something?"

"Yeah, you're neck and then I'll have to unload all this crap on my own."

As if to rub it in his comrade's face the first worker kicked at the trash near his feet again only this time his foot caught on something and he lost his balance, crying out as he fell.

"What the hell?" he exclaimed when he looked at his foot and saw a hand reaching from beneath the surface layer of trash and grasping his ankle. Jet black and clawed, the hand was obviously not human. Then he gasped as an alien burst from beneath the trash by his feet and screamed as he was lifted into the air by the creature.

Cursing, his comrade turned to flee, abandoning the cart as he started to run only for the lightweight vehicle to rock as something landed on top of it with a 'thud'. Looking up the worker was just in time to see the second alien leaping towards him.

Venice made sure to be in the command centre to watch the battle between the *Almayer* and the *Razumov*. On the surface of LV-426 this meant being there several hours after it was all over, the heat and light that the orbiting security satellites were configured to detect taking that long to reach the moon. As her head of security Freeman joined her, standing behind her chair as she watched the battle play out on a viewscreen.

"That's a kill." he said when the *Razumov's* missiles exploded.

"How can you tell?" Venice asked.

"That sudden burst of heat? That was an explosion and since we didn't see any signs of a laser to intercept the missile or EM pulses to indicate late stage jamming that means that the missile will have hit what it was fired at. The marine ship." Freeman explained. Then moments later he pointed at the screen again when there was another brief pulse of energy, "See? That's the *Razumov* turning for home. Now they're firing up their main drives. They'll be back with us a couple of days."

"And what was that?" Venice said when the screen showed a second heat source that in terms of space travel was very close to the *Razumov* but stronger.

"That's another engine flare." Freeman said, "Crap. The marines must have used a decoy and Collins fell for it. They're right on his tail and he doesn't have a clue about it."

"How do you know?"

"Look at where they are, the heat from the *Razumov's* own engines is masking the thermal signature of the marine ship." Freeman said before there was another brief flash of light that projected out from the second thermal signature.

"That was a missile wasn't it?" Venice said, recognising the pattern from what she had seen of the *Razumov's* missile launch.

Freeman nodded.

"Collins' only hope is that either his crew get enough warning to activate their defences or they've already turned over control of their ship to the computer. That will stand a better chance of reacting fast enough to save the ship."

It was then that the dot on the screen representing the *Razumov* suddenly appeared to grow in size before shrinking back but still remaining larger than it had been before.

"Damn." Freeman hissed.

"What happened?" Venice said.

"They were hit, they're on fire and that marine ship is still closing on them. If the hit was as bad as I'm guessing then they don't stand a chance."

Venice and Freeman then watched as the *Almayer* overtook the *Razumov*, the dot representing their own ship pulsing as it was hit again and the explosions increased its temperature.

"That's it." Freeman said, "The *Razumov* is gone and that marine ship is on its way here. We don't have anything that can stop them either. They can just nuke us from orbit." then he noticed that Venice was

smiling, "What are you thinking?" he asked.

"We don't need to stop them." Venice replied.

"Our ship just tried to shoot them down. Do you not think they'll remember that?"

"Ah but there's no proof the *Razumov* was our ship is there?" Venice said, "Remember that we've done nothing illegal here. We've lawfully claimed ownership of a derelict spacecraft and are attempting to reverse engineer it. All of our experiments on the life forms we found within have been carried out under the strictest quarantine procedures. When the marines get here I intend to invite them down to take a look for themselves."

"You want me to set up an ambush?" Freeman asked, "My men can take their dropships and then we can use them to bypass their ship's defences."

"No, not at all Mister Freeman. I want the marines made welcome."

"But how will you explain the *Razumov* to them?" Freeman asked.

"I'll tell them that it was a pirate ship and that it entered the system and destroyed our own vessel some time after the *Almayer* left Gateway. I'll even pretend that we sent a distress signal and were told a marine rescue ship was on its way."

"So why are we still here if there was a pirate ship hanging around all this time?"

"Because you and your men were able to drive off every attempt they made to land Mister Freeman. They were forced to resort to trying to starve us out. That's why they were in position to attack ships coming here from Earth that could be bringing in supplies." Venice said and Freeman nodded slowly.

"That could work." he said, "We can pass the damage to the infirmary off as the result of their actions."

"We'll have to burn our own relay satellites and everyone will have to be properly briefed of course." Venice went on, "It'll be no good if when the marines arrived some fool tells them the truth as soon as they step through the door."

As the *Almayer* approached LV-426, entering into orbit around the gas giant Calpamos that the moon itself also orbited, the marine infantry aboard the starship were woken from hypersleep. Lawrence and Maddie were present in the hypersleep chamber to monitor this process.

"Move!" Lawrence yelled as the marines began to climb out of their hypersleep capsules, "Come on, we've already been shot at since we arrived in the system and if not for the captain all of you would have died in your sleep."

"Would we have to listen to you yelling at us if we were dead gunny?" one of the marines muttered as he began to move towards the row of lockers where their uniforms and personal belongings were stored.

"Got a problem with my voice Manchester?" Lawrence shouted when he overheard this comment, "Because the answer is yes. When your lazy ass ends up in hell God and Satan are going to let me shout at all of you for all eternity. That's my idea of heaven."

"Well they all appear to waking up fine enough." Maddie said, watching the last of the marines to emerge from his hypersleep capsule and immediately drop to his hands and knees, coughing.

"Easy when yours is the first face I see." another marine commented as he walked past her and Lawrence.

"Why thank you Fenton but you're not my type." Lawrence replied. Then he raised his voice as he added, "Okay people breakfast will be served in five minutes. You have one hour and not one minute more to dress, eat and wash two weeks of hypersleep crud off yourselves before I want you all assembled in the hangar for final mission briefing from Captain Williams."

"Will she be there too?" a marine called out, looking at Maddie.

"Sure I will Reagan." Maddie replied, "Rubbing your face in how the captain has me and you don't." then she looked at Lawrence and added, "Okay since there haven't been any problems with revival I'm going to head back to the bridge and let Williams know we're on schedule."

Lawrence nodded as Maddie then made her way out of the hypersleep chamber, heading back to the bridge where Williams and the dropship crews continued to monitor the *Almayer's* progress. Control of the ship had been turned over to the computer by this point but the marines remained in the bridge to monitor events for themselves. Williams had his back turned as Maddie entered the room and she walked right up behind him, leaning around the back of his chair and kissing him on the cheek.

"The kiddies are up and about." she said, "Lawrence has ordered them to be in the hangar in an hour for you to brief them."

Williams nodded.

"Thanks." he said, "LV Four-Two-Six should be coming up over the horizon at any time now."

"Just getting line of sight now captain." Kent commented and then Dunham spoke up before Williams could respond.

"And we're getting a signal from them as well." he said.

"They're calling us?" Sanders asked and Dunham nodded.

"The signal's coming straight from the surface. In fact I'd say it was coming from the target area. Certainly no more than fifty to a hundred clicks from it." he confirmed.

"There's a chance that they think we're their own ship coming back. Maddie go tell Lawrence to hurry everyone along. Whoever's down there on the surface knows we're about to pay them a visit." Williams ordered and Maddie kissed him again before releasing him.

"I miss you already." she said as she dashed from the bridge and Williams looked at Dunham.

"Put them through Corporal." he said.

"-calling approaching vessel, respond please. This is Weyland-Yutani research team THX one-one-three-eight calling approaching vessel, respond please." a male voice said over the radio.

"This is Captain Williams aboard the *USS Almayor*, United States Colonial Marine Corps." Williams replied, "Who am I speaking to?"

The voice at the other end of the radio then changed to a female one.

"My name is Venice. I'm in charge of the research facility here on Acheron." Venice said, "Thank God you got here when you did."

Williams frowned and the other marines present exchanged confused glances.

"Miss Venice your attack on this vessel-" Williams began before Venice interrupted him.

"Captain Williams I can assure you that the ship that attacked you wasn't ours. It attacked us as well, destroyed our transport and all of our communication satellites before they attempted to land troops here. We drove them off but the ship was blockading us. Aren't you here in response to our distress signal? I admit we weren't expecting any help quite so soon." she said.

"We are here on a different matter." Williams said, "Miss Venice I'll be deploying troops to the surface of LV Four-Two-Six and I expect your full co-operation."

"Of course. We'll be expecting you." Venice said and then the channel went dead.

"What are our sensors telling us about LV Four-Two-Six?" Williams asked, "Are we picking up any defences?"

"Nothing sir." Sanders said, shaking her head, "Nothing in orbit at all, not even a comms satellite network so they can see and talk to people over the horizon. If they tried to contact Earth then they must have done it while the moon was in the correct orbital position for them to get a clear line of sight."

"Which was when?" Williams said.

"The computer suggests eight days ago given the moon's orbit and rotation." Midland said, "They had a short window of opportunity to get off a signal."

"That's after we left Gateway." Kent commented, "We were already on our way here."

"What else can you tell me about the moon?" Williams said.

"I'm picking up a high level of atmospheric radioactivity for an environment that's supposedly being terraformed." Sanders said, "Levels are highest where the colony was located."

"According to the report from Ellen Ripley the colony's atmosphere processor overloaded and melted down." Williams said, nodding, "What about the target area?"

"Lower. There's a mountain range between the colony site and the target area that is acting as a barrier to most of the fallout."

"So we won't need any protective equipment then?" Williams said.

"No sir. The atmosphere's safe enough as long as we don't plan on spending a decade or so here."

"Think they bought that?" Venice said to Oliver as soon as she had shut off the transmitter and immediately inserted another cigarette into her mouth and lit it.

"I'm not the one to ask." Oliver replied, "I think Mister Freeman is better qualified in subterfuge. Speaking of our security chief he's caught two more deserters."

Venice shook her head, placing a hand on her brow.

"That makes eight now." she said and Oliver nodded.

"Not everyone seems to think that your plan is going to work. They think that the marines will just nuke us as soon as they enter orbit and are trying to get away." he said.

"Just as long as we can keep them out of the way when that Captain Williams gets here. If anyone's going to break it will be them." Venice said.

"Actually I'm more worried about the one's that have managed to get past Freeman's guards."

"You mean people have actually successfully deserted?" Venice exclaimed.

"That's the only explanation. With all these attempts to run away I thought I'd run a check on anyone and I came up four short."

"Who have we lost?" Venice asked.

"There's a pair of sanitation workers but the significant ones are Allen and Mayer from our-" Oliver began.

"Allen's gone? That little creep was obsessed with that ship, I can't believe that he'd do anything that would take him away from it. When did that happen?"

"I'm not sure. Things have been pretty hectic since the explosion and Freeman was more interested in looking for explosives than people but no-one can remember seeing Allen for the last day or two at least. He must have made a run for it as soon as the *Razumov* was destroyed. Before Freeman could get the facility

locked down properly." Oliver said.

"Have you told Freeman about this?" Venice said.

"Not yet, I thought you ought to know first."

"Well go and tell him I want a squad of his men to track them down. We can't have anyone just running around out there while the marines are on their way."

"I'll go and tell him right away." Oliver said, nodding, "I'm sure they won't have got far. It's odd really, everyone Freeman's men have caught have at least had the good sense to pack some survival gear. As far as I can tell none of those that are missing took anything with them but the clothes on their backs."

"Oh and Oliver." Venice called out as he started to walk away and she beckoned him closer to her.

"Yes Miss Venice?" he asked, leaning in close.

"Perhaps it would discourage disloyalty if word started to get around that anyone else found trying to run away will be used as a test subject now that we've used up all the chimpanzees." she whispered in his ear.

7.

Williams looked at the marines gathered in the *Almayer's* hangar, most of them sat on equipment containers in front of the two dropships that took their names *Little Grey Man* and *Sheriff Squirrel* from the nose art painted just below their cockpit canopies that consisted of an image of a stereotypical alien life form that had been popular among humans for two centuries and also a reproduction of a children's cartoon character that had been popular about ten years earlier. For the time being the marines had trusted the *Almayer's* computer to pilot the ship itself without supervision and both dropship crews were present in addition to the ground troops. Though he had not deployed with all of these troops before now Williams still knew the names of them all, priding himself in being able to recognise every marine in his company by sight alone.

"Okay marines this is going to have to be quick." he began, "Basically whoever is down on the surface of LV Four-Two-Six knows we're coming. I spoke with their leader, a woman by the name of Venice and she flat out denied having anything to do with the ship that fired on us at the edge of the system. Personally I don't believe a word of what she said but without concrete proof of their complicity in the attack we're going to have to go along with what she said."

"Excuse me sir." a marine said, raising his hand briefly, "But does this mean we don't get to kick ass?"

"Keep it down Washington." Lawrence said sternly, jabbing his finger towards the marine as the others in the platoon grinned.

"Our mission here remains what it was when we left Earth." Williams said, "To discover as much as we can about what happened to the survivors of the *Sulaco* mission. Everything points to the involvement of the Weyland-Yutani corporation and I'm hoping that the proof we need is going to be down on the surface at the research post they seem to have set up near the alleged site of a crashed alien starship. Our mission will also be to neutralise any threat that this vessel may pose."

"How can a wrecked ship be a threat?" one of the female marines, a corporal called Barns asked.

"According to the report from one of the survivors of the *Sulaco* mission the ship is the source of the alien lifeforms that overran the colony. Sergeant Lawrence and I encountered just two of the creatures when we recovered the *Sulaco* and they took out nearly the entire team as well as destroying an Aerospace Force attack ship. If you see one of these creatures then do not hesitate, shoot to kill. But be careful, their blood is highly corrosive. Do not, I repeat do not let them get anywhere near you." Williams said and then he glanced at Maddie, "Maddie I don't want them to think that we're leaving the *Almayer* on automatic. I need them to believe that our synthetic is still up here to relay everything we encounter back to Earth and take the ship back if anything happens to us."

"The ship can do that all by itself." Maddie replied, frowning, "Plus you're going to need me down there."

"Sure." a marine muttered, "We could all do with what she can offer." and then he high-fived the marines sat either side of him.

"Can it Garcia!" Lawrence snapped.

"I know." Williams said to Maddie, ignoring Garcia's suggestion, "That's why I want you to draw a uniform and disguise yourself as an officer. You'll ride in the second APC and as far as anyone is concerned you're my subordinate, Lieutenant Madison."

"Yes sir!" Maddie responded, suddenly snapping to attention and saluting Williams.

"The platoon will drop together," Williams continued without Maddie, "but given that the Weyland-Yutani personnel on site are at least at face value inviting us down my team will head for their landing pad and drop us off at their facility. The second squad is to head for the downed alien ship, deploy there and scout out the exterior. I want a full list of all the ways in and out but under no circumstances are any of you to enter the ship without my express permission. I'll probably need Maddie with me so Gunnery Sergeant Lawrence will take command in the APC. Now there are likely going to be armed company personnel on site and although we suspect that the operation here had a hand in the events aboard the *Sulaco* as well as the attack on this vessel we haven't proven anything yet so you are not to fire unless you are fired upon or if Sergeant Lawrence or myself give permission." Williams then paused, looking at the marines and giving them the marines the chance to ask any questions they had but when no-one spoke up he looked at his watch, "Okay we've got four hours until we reach low orbit. I want us in the dropships ready to go by then."

The *Sheriff Squirrel* was the first dropship moved into launch position, lowered into the *Almayer's* ventral deployment bay. Alpha Team under Sergeant Ellis was loaded into the wheeled armoured personnel carrier stored in the dropship's payload bay while Williams sat at the tactical operations centre within this with Maddie strapped into a seat close by him. In the dropship's cockpit Kent sat in the pilot's seat and counted down the seconds to deployment. When he reached five the external doors below the dropship slid open to reveal the moon below.

"Four. Three. Two. One." he said and then he released the clamps holding the dropship in the launch bay at the same time as he said, "Go."

The dropship lurched as it fell from the bay and was immediately caught up in the gravitational pull of LV-426. "We're clear of the ship." Midland said from the weapons' officers seat, "No sign of hostile activity from the surface."

"Okay we're going in." Kent said, angling the dropship's nose downwards and the craft's engines lit up as it accelerated towards the moon.

Meanwhile the external doors to the deployment bay closed behind the *Sheriff Squirrel* and then the internal ones opened as the Little Grey Man was moved into position and then lowered into the bay as well. In the cockpit of this second dropship Dunham and Sanders then went through the same process as crew of the first, counting down the time until deployment before the dropship was released and plummeted towards LV-426, following the *Sheriff Squirrel*.

The two dropships rocked as they descended through the atmosphere, buffeted by the strong winds and pockets of different air pressures and inside their APCs the marines they carried were thrown against their restraints.

"Passing ten thousand metres now. Deploying ordnance pods." Kent announced as the four missile carrying weapon pods unfolded from their recessed mounts within the dropship's fuselage, "We should be coming up on visual range soon."

"I want to see this." Maddie said, releasing the safety rail that held her in her seat and then moving to stand behind Williams, clutching the side of his chair to steady herself as she looked at the wall of video screens he was watching. Most of these showed the feeds from the marines' individual helmet mounted cameras but there was also a feed taken directly from the dropship's forward mounted camera.

"Careful." Williams told Maddie when the dropship rocked again.

"I'm fine." the android responded, "Besides if I do fall I'll land on you."

"That's what I'm worried about." Williams said. Then he pointed to the dropships camera feed, "There." he said as a flashing point of light appeared.

"Their beacon?" Maddie said and Williams nodded.

"That's my guess, yes." he said.

"We've got the beacon." Kent then announced from the cockpit and as the dropship turned the point of light moved into the centre of the monitor.

When the two dropships broke through the bottom of the cloud layer above the Weyland-Yutani research facility the marines finally got a clear look at their destination and Williams' attention was initially drawn to the damaged section of the complex.

"They've definitely had some trouble." he said.

"Never mind that." Maddie responded, "Take a look at that." and she pointed to the derelict starship that was just about visible at the edge of the monitor.

"Incredible." Williams said as he saw the derelict for himself for the first time.

"Picking up radar from the ground." Midland announced, "They've seen us. I'm not picking up any targeting sweeps though." then after a moment's pause he added, "Captain we've got a transmission coming through from the surface. Patching it through to you now."

"This is Captain Williams. Go ahead.

"Captain, glad to see you." Venice said, "Your ships can set down on our pad."

"My ship is on its way there now. We should be with you in about five minutes." Williams said, "You may want to warn anyone you have near that derelict ship that my Bravo Team will be deploying there."

"Captain that ship is the property of Weyland-Yutani. We have salvage rights to it." Venice said and Maddie smiled when she heard this over her own radio headset.

"Just tell your people not to get in our way. Williams out." Williams said before he turned off the radio, "Kent," he then said to the dropship's pilot, "deploy the APC on their pad then dust off and circle. I don't want to give these corporate goons the chance to try and gain control of our dropship."

"Well that was rude." Venice said as she turned towards Freeman and Oliver.

"So what do you want my men to do?" Freeman asked.

"Not start a shooting war with the Colonial Marine Corps, that's for certain." Venice answered, "For now at least we need to appear co-operative. At least until we know we can deal with their air cover. Have your men maintain their positions at the ship but tell them to give way as soon as the marines arrive."

Freeman nodded.

"I'll see to it now." he said before he turned to leave.

"In the meantime I think we ought to go and meet our guests." Venice added, putting out her cigarette as she got to her feet.

She and Oliver then walked together to the door closest to the landing pad, remaining stood in the doorway itself while flanked by a pair of commandos to keep out of the rain that continued to fall. Looking up into the

sky they quickly saw the running lights of the two marine dropships as they descended towards the research facility.

"Look at that large structure there." Maddie said, pointing to a building that was only partially complete, "Think that's something they're building or something that's been destroyed?"

"There's too little damage to what's standing for it to have been the result of hostile action." Williams said, "I think they need somewhere enclosed with a lot of room for whatever they're doing here."

The APC then shook slightly as the platform on which it was mounted was lowered from the underside of the dropship at the same time as its landing gear deployed.

"Stand by for deployment." Kent announced.

"Copy that, engine hot." Private Perez, the APC's driver responded as she started up the armoured vehicle's engine.

A heavy 'clump' indicated that the dropship had touched down on the landing pad and the console in front of Perez told her that the dropship crew had released the clamps holding the APC in place. Pressing her foot down hard on the accelerator, Perez drove the APC from the dropship and raced down the ramp leading from the landing pad to the research facility where Venice and Oliver waited. The moment that the APC was clear of the ground beneath the dropship Kent lifted the craft off the ground again, getting it back into the air where it would be safe from attempts to board it.

"Looks like we've got a welcoming committee waiting for us captain." Perez said when she saw the figures standing in the doorway.

"Think that woman is that 'Venice' you spoke with?" Maddie asked as she looked at the APC's forward camera feed.

"Possibly." Williams said, "Though I wouldn't put it past these corporate types to send a minion of sorts."

"I don't like the look of those guards." Ellis said as he joined Williams and Maddie by the operations centre.

"There are only two of them at least." Williams said, "Perez make sure our left side is presented to the door when you pull up. I want us to be able to debus without being in their line of fire."

"That'll limit our forward cannons' ability to lay down cover." Ellis commented.

"I know. But I think a pair of phased plasma cannons will provide us with all the cover we need." Williams replied, glancing towards the main turret mechanism at the rear of the APC.

Perez turned the APC at the last moment, bringing it to a halt in front of the doorway and the marines sat inside released their safety bars.

"Go! Go! Go!" Ellis yelled as he darted to the side mounted hatch and pulled it open. In pairs the marines leapt through the open doorway, splitting up so that they moved around both the front and back of the vehicle as they deployed to cover the research facility's doorway as well as other directions.

Oliver stepped back when the marines appeared with their weapons held ready to use. On the other hand Venice retained her composure, calmly putting out her cigarette on the floor by standing on it. Meanwhile the two commandos protecting her lifted their pulse rifles though like the marines facing them they did not aim their weapons at anyone for now.

"You're all clear captain." Ellis signalled when the marines were deployed and Williams and Maddie followed the squad out through the doorway, walking around the APC and towards Venice.

"Captain Williams." she said, "Is all this really necessary?"

"Call it a precaution." Williams replied. Then he glanced at Maddie and added, "This is my adjutant, Lieutenant Madison." and Maddie smiled.

"A pleasure to meet you lieutenant." Venice said, "So captain, perhaps you and your adjutant would like to step inside and you can explain properly what brings you to Acheron. I'm still somewhat confused what it is about our operation that concerns the marines."

"First Squad with me." Williams ordered, "Second Squad remain with the APC. You too Sergeant Ellis."

"Yes captain." Ellis responded as the four marines of First Squad moved towards the doorway.

"Really captain, there's no need for-" Venice began.

"Better to have my squad and not need them than need them and not have them. Especially when you clearly have armed personnel on site." Williams interrupted.

"Quite." Venice replied, frowning angrily.

The dropship *Little Grey Man* circled the derelict alien vessel and from its cockpit Dunham and Sanders looked down at the strange horseshoe shaped ship..

"How long do you suppose that thing's been there?" Sanders said.

"Don't know. There's something about it that looks ancient but its hull doesn't seem to have been eroded in any way by the atmosphere." Dunham replied.

"Well I'm not picking up any EM readings from it. Didn't that report suggest it was broadcasting a distress signal that drew in the original freighter? The *Nostramo*?"

"Someone must have shut it off or it ran out of power or something. After all, if it was still broadcasting when

the terraformers arrived then they would have found it right away.”

“Hang on.” Sanders said when she noticed something on her console, “I’ve got heat signatures.”

“The ship?” Dunham asked.

“No. I think they’re humans.” Sanders answered and Dunham activated the communication link to the APC in the dropship’s storage bay.

“Gunny it looks like you’re going to have company down there when you land.” he said.

“Okay, try and put us down somewhere that we won’t be getting an RPG in us as soon as we do.” Lawrence responded and inside the APC he looked at the marines carried by the vehicle, “Okay Bravo Team I want deployment as soon as we’re clear of the dropship. Brown, keep the APC back. First Squad goes left, Second Squad goes right. Sergeant Sellers will go with you while I go with First Squad.”

“You’re not staying with the TOC gunny?” Sellers asked, nodding towards the APC’s tactical operations centre and Lawrence smiled.

“Hell no.” he said, “I’m no officer. I work for a living. The TOC will record the feed from our cameras and transmit everything back to the *Almayer* if we need to review it later. Right now I think the boots on the ground we have the better.”

As the APC was lowered from beneath the dropship the marines including Lawrence got out of their seats, leaving only the driver Brown in place.

As with Alpha Team’s APC, Brown drove from the dropship as soon as the clamps were released, weaving around the numerous rocky outcroppings to get far enough from the dropship that it was able to take off safely. As soon as this happened Brown braked and brought the APC to a complete stop just over a hundred metres from the derelict starship, the two forward sections of the craft extended upwards over the armoured vehicle.

Lawrence immediately opened the door and was the first to leap out of the APC, unslinging his pulse rifle and dropping into a crouching position to cover the rest of the marines as they also disembarked. When First Squad’s machine gunner exited the APC he paused and looked up at the structure of the alien ship.

“Whoa.” he said in amazement.

“Never mind the sight seeing Manchester. We’ve got a job to do now move.” Lawrence said. Then addressing the rest of the team he added, “Use your motion trackers but remember that we aren’t to initiate any hostile action against human targets.”

Moving in pairs the two four man squads began to sweep around both sides of the alien starship, examining the lower sections for possible access points. They found one of these in the form of what looked like a tear in the ship’s hull resulting from when it had crashed on LV-426. These had been marked with a length of bright yellow tape strung up across it.

“Contact!” First Squad’s leader called out.

“What direction Washington?” Lawrence asked but before the marine could answer a pair of Weyland-Yutani commandos armed with pulse rifles appeared ahead of them. One of them immediately took cover, while the other let his rifle hang by his side and raised his hands.

“We’re not looking for a fight.” he said, “But I’d suggest you keep out of there.” and then he pointed towards the hole that was taped off.

“Oh don’t worry, we’ve heard about what’s inside that ship.” Lawrence said, lowering his rifle, “So how about you tell us how many more of these ways in and out there are?”

“We’ve counted six in all.” the commando answered, “This is the only one on this side of the ship though. There are two more on the other side and three to the front of the central portion of the ship.”

Lawrence nodded.

“Thanks, now I need you to vacate the area. I don’t want anyone not part of my unit here.” he said.

For a moment the commando stood motionless and Lawrence thought that he might refuse the order to withdraw but then he bowed his head slightly.

“If that’s what you want. We’ve been ordered to co-operate.” he said and then he signalled to the other commando before they both began to walk back towards the research facility with their rifles slung.

“Captain I can assure you that everything done here is within the law.” Venice said and she held out her pack of cigarettes to offer both Williams and Maddie one.

“No thank you.” Williams replied while Maddie just curled her lip.

“As you wish.” Venice said, taking a cigarette from the pack and lighting it, “Now as I was saying this operation is being conducted entirely within the law. We’re a biological research team. Nothing more.”

“Yes and the species you are researching is highly dangerous, responsible for the deaths of more than a hundred and fifty colonists on this moon, plus two teams of marines and the crew of a freighter. There are also three people including a colonial marine missing.” Williams said but Venice shrugged.

“What do you want me to say captain?” she asked, “I can assure you that neither myself nor Weyland-Yutani was responsible for anything you have just mentioned.”

“According to a witness it was a Weyland-Yutani employee, a Carter J Burke, who instructed the colony here

on LV Four-Two-Six to investigate this location." Maddie said, "No warning about the presence of a hostile organism was given. According to our records Burke was until very recently your Director of Special Projects."

"In addition we found the body of a Eugene Gibbs, a junior executive from Weyland-Yutani aboard the *USS Sulaco*." Williams added, "So I'm sure you can see that I can't just take your claims at face value."

"Perhaps if I let you have a look around the facility you'd feel better." Venice said, "You'll be able to see that the examples of the alien life form catalogued as Xenomorph XX One-Two-One were obtained by legal means and are secure."

"You have some of them here?" Williams exclaimed.

"Of course. Like I said this is a biological research unit. Of course we're interested in the ship itself but the real value is in its cargo. We removed some of the eggs from its hold and then used lab animals as hosts for the adult creatures. Chimpanzees to be exact, I can show you all the paperwork if you want." Venice said, "Though frankly I'm surprised that you don't have an android with you to advise you on what the correct procedures are for a project like this. I thought it as standard practice for every marine platoon to include an android for such purposes."

"Ours is back on our ship." Maddie said, "Keeping an eye on things from up there just in case anything goes wrong down here."

"Somewhat over-cautious if you ask me. All of our specimens have remained quite secure even during the pirate attack, there is no danger here." Venice said.

"You said we could look around, well show me these aliens." Williams replied, getting to his feet.

"Of course, if you'd like to come with me I'll take you to the command centre. You can see them easiest from there." Venice told him.

The two commandos were walking past the landfill site on their way back to the main research facility when one of them came to a stop.

"Did you see that?" he said and the other halted as well.

"See what?" he asked.

"Something moved right over there." the first commando said, pointing across the piles of trash.

"There's no-one out here." the second said, "Trash is dumped between eleven and twelve hundred hours. That's not for another two and a half hours yet."

"Well I saw something moving." the first commando said and he reached for the motion tracker he had slung over his shoulder. Activating the sensor device he held it out towards the landfill site and stared at the compact monitor, "There! See?" he said when a blip appeared on the screen for a moment.

"It must be one of the deserters." the second commando said.

"Should we call it in then?"

"No. We don't know if the marines are listening in on our transmissions. We'll handle this ourselves. Quietly, we can't be attracting too much attention. Now which way are they?"

"I only picked up one." the commando with the tracker replied, "That way."

The two commandos then began to advance cautiously across the landfill site, their rifles still slung and their pistols still in their holsters. Both men were well trained in hand to hand combat and as far as they were concerned they did not need firearms to deal with just a few civilian deserters. Periodically they would stop so that the motion tracker could give a more reliable reading before moving on further until the commando carrying the tracker reached out and grabbed his comrade by the arm, pointing to a large mound of trash just ahead of them. The second commando nodded and then held up three fingers. Lowering the motion tracker the first watched as the fingers were lowered one at a time to count them down and when the last was lowered both men rushed forwards and around the mound of trash. However, what they found on the other side was not one of the missing men from the research centre.

Having heard their hurried approach, the alien had time to stand up to its full height and turn to face them. It hissed as the men appeared, both of them freezing in terror at the sight of the creature towering over them. The commandos reached for the pulse rifles slung over their shoulders but the alien moved too quickly, leaping at one of them and knocking him to the ground before lashing out with its tail at the second. As the second commando was hurled backwards his finger tightened on the trigger of his pulse rifle and he fired a rapid burst of explosive rounds into a nearby pile of trash before he came crashing down and the weapon was knocked from his grasp.

All of a sudden a second alien came bounding around another large mound of trash and the commando, seeing that his pulse rifle had landed out of reach instead went for his sidearm. He managed to get the weapon out of its holster and disengage the safety catch in time to aim at the charging alien but as he fired he watched in horror as the rounds bounced off the creature's armoured exoskeleton. In desperation he continued to fire though and by chance just as the alien was looming over him one of his shots found a more vulnerable spot and a spot of green appeared against the black of its outer skin. However, as the bullet entered the alien a spurt of blood came from the wound. This splashed across the commando's face and he

screamed in agony as the acidic fluid burned his flesh before the alien lunged at him.

8.

Venice stood in front of the wall dominated by the video monitors showing the aliens in their pens.

"These are different." Maddie said, "The creature I saw on the *Sulaco* was thinner and it didn't hunch as much as these do."

"You encountered a creature born from a human being." Venice told her, "As I told you, these were all hatched from chimpanzees right there in the pens. Obviously the species takes some physical characteristics from the host during its gestation."

"How many do you have?" Williams asked, frowning as he saw the dozens of aliens in their pens.

"We took forty eggs from the ship and implanted them all in our chimps." Venice said.

"Then we've got a big problem." Maddie responded, "Because unless there are two aliens you aren't showing us then you've got two on the loose."

"There's an explanation for that." Venice said, "After the parasite stage of the aliens' life cycle attached themselves to our chimps I had them moved to our surgical unit to see if it was possible to remove them before the embryo was implanted. You see captain, Weyland-Yutani recognises the danger these creatures pose and if there ever is an outbreak of them anywhere we want to be able to save as many people as possible."

"Yeah, the company's got a real big heart." Williams said, "So what happened? Were you able to remove the facehuggers?"

"Unfortunately not. An attempt to simply prise the creature off the subject's face resulted in the tail strangling the chimp while cutting it off failed because of the species' corrosive blood. We lost both subjects as well as the alien creatures themselves."

"How did the facehuggers die?" Williams asked.

"After the test subjects died the parasite creatures detached themselves and we were forced to destroy them." Venice said.

"So you're still sitting on more than three dozen alien killing machines." Maddie said. Then she looked around at the rows of computers in the command centre, "Mind if I take a look at your computer records?"

"Yes actually." Venice said, "As far as I'm concerned I'm giving you more than you're entitled to just by letting you in here but if you want to access confidential company records then you can send back to Earth for a court order."

"I don't think that will be necessary." Williams said, knowing that in addition to the two weeks communication with Earth would take the time taken for a judge to issue a warrant that Weyland-Yutani was likely to mobilise all of its legal might against would more than double this, "But I do intend to inspect the pens those creatures are being held in."

The two squads of Bravo Team had met up once more after having circled around the alien starship and Sellers was updating Lawrence on the entry points they had found to the vessel when shots rang out.

"That was pulse rifle fire." one of the marines said as she turned towards the source of the sound.

"Yes it was Willis." Lawrence commented, "But it sure as hell wasn't from us."

"What about Alpha team?" Reagan suggested.

"I doubt it but I better call this in anyway." Lawrence replied and he raised a hand to his radio headset, Lawrence calling Captain Williams, we just heard gunfire from your direction. Is everything okay?"

"Gunfire?" Williams replied, "I've not authorised any shooting."

"Captain we just heard it too." Ellis added as the squad he had been left with outside the facility looked towards the derelict alien spacecraft, "Sounded like it came from that downed ship."

"I ordered a couple of company goons back to their camp." Lawrence said, "Have they turned up yet?"

"Negative, we've not seen them." Ellis said, "It's possible that they came in the south entrance."

"Sergeant Ellis prepare the men." Williams ordered, "Alpha Team is to move towards the derelict ship and Bravo towards the facility. Whoever's out there shooting we'll catch them between us."

"What about me?" Maddie asked.

"Stay put." Williams ordered, looking around to see if they were being observed in the corridor they were stood in that led towards the holding pens. Then in a whisper he continued, "Try to drop out of sight and start poking around. Find anything you can that will contradict what Venice has told us, especially if it connects Weyland-Yutani to what happened on the *Sulaco* or the attack on the *Almayer*. Think you can handle that?"

"Sure." Maddie replied, "If I can pretend to be a marine lieutenant then I can pretend to be a spy as well."

Williams rode in Alpha Team's APC, monitoring the camera feeds from the entire platoon as they closed in on

the source of the gunfire from both directions while above them both dropships circled as they hunted for the shooter.

"Captain I think I may have something." Sanders commented as she studied her dropship's sensors, "Image intensification is picking something up. Not much but it is an artificial light source."

"Where?" Williams asked.

"About six hundred metres ahead of your position and off to the west. From the looks of the area it's some sort of landfill site."

"Perez hold here. Alpha Team spread out and advance in line. Bravo Team repeat from the other side.

Whatever's out there I don't want it to slip past us." Williams ordered.

Their APCs halting behind them, the two teams of marines continued to advance side by side as they made their way towards the light source that had been identified from the circling dropship. The terrain of the landfill site was uneven and unstable, a combination that slowed the marines and made their advance far noisier than any of them liked.

"I've got nothing on infrared." the machine gunner Brubaker said as he scanned the area ahead through his smart gun's tracing system.

"Don't trust infrared alone." Lawrence said, "If there are aliens active around here they won't show up."

"All teams halt." Williams ordered from the APC, "Go to motion trackers and sweep the area."

The marines carrying the platoon's motion trackers unslung them and began to scan the area of ground between the two teams.

"Devon, Willis. Anyone reading anything?" Lawrence asked.

"Negative gunny." Devon responded.

"Nothing here either." Willis added, looking up from her motion tracker as she spoke.

"Teller, Miller. Are you picking anything up?" Ellis said to the marines of his team.

"Nothing moving this side of the dump either sarge." Miller answered.

"Sanders do you still have eyes on that light source?" Williams asked.

"Confirmed. Single small light source right between the two teams." she replied.

"It could just be some piece of electrical trash that someone threw away." Sergeant Sellers commented.

"We need to be certain. Both teams move in." Williams ordered, "APCs and dropships stand by to provide support if necessary."

The marine platoon began to advance again, closing in on the source of the light seen by the dropship crew.

"Alpha Team it's right over the next mound." Sanders transmitted when she saw the marines nearing the light source.

"Down." Ellis ordered and the marines in his team dropped into a crouching position while Bravo Team closed in from the other side.

"I'm not picking up any movement apart from Bravo Team." Miller said.

"Bravo Team is in position now." Lawrence signalled.

"Alpha Team advance by squads." Williams said and Ellis got to his feet while waving one of his squads forwards and the five marines moved up the mound before pointing their weapons over the top.

"Err captain, are you seeing this?" Ellis asked as he peered over the top of the mound, the feed from his camera being transmitted directly back to the APC where Williams sat watching. On the screens showing the feeds from the marines cameras now showed that a pulse rifle lay on the trash covered ground with its glowing LED ammunition counter facing upwards. Reading eighty-six rounds remaining in the magazine, it was obvious that the weapon had been fired and that suggested that it was the source of the gunfire that had been heard.

"Sergeant I want you to retrieve that weapon. Everyone else spread out and search the area. Use extreme caution. We don't know what we're dealing with here."

To complete her disguise Maddie had included a holstered pistol on her belt and she found that resting her hand on the weapon became useful when she went to visit the pens where the now adult alien warriors were being held. Initially the Weyland-Yutani personnel there did not want to let her inside but when she appeared to be reaching for her gun they relented. Of course they had no way of knowing that she could not have tried to use it against a human being without her hard wired life preservation programming activating and causing her to shut down immediately. Even a direct order from Williams could not override this.

Seeing the aliens in person was little different to watching them on the monitors in the facility's command centre but at least this way Maddie knew that she was not watching an image that had been doctored in any way. Initially she walked all the way along the hallway running between the two rows of pens, counting the aliens as she went. Sometimes this was more difficult because of the resin nests that the creatures had begun to construct in their pens. This was so close in appearance to the aliens themselves that when some pressed themselves up against the walls they became hard to spot even for an android's vision. Just as Venice had said there were thirty-eight aliens inside the pens, plus two more pens that were empty apart from an already hatched alien egg in an alcove at the back. Maddie also noticed hatched eggs in identical

alcoves at the backs of the other pens where these had not already been covered by the creatures' secreted resin.

The aliens themselves seemed to ignore Maddie's presence, though the lack of obvious sensory organs meant that she had no idea whether any of them were watching as she walked past their pens. This was something that concerned Maddie, as an android she did not know whether the aliens would ignore her. When faced with one of the creatures aboard the *Sulaco* it had left her completely unharmed. This was after it had destroyed the android Nero, but he had fired a pistol at the alien and thus presented an obvious threat. The potential problem here as Maddie saw it was that the aliens could react differently to her than they did to the research staff who periodically also walked along the hallway to double check the pens and she saw two of them standing right next to the transparent barrier at the front of one pen and peer inside, looking upwards. Seeing this as an opportunity to get closer while concealing her synthetic nature Maddie walked up behind the two scientists.

"Is something wrong in there?" she asked.

"Oh no, not yet." one of the researchers replied.

"Then what are you looking for?" Maddie said and the other researcher pointed up at the ceiling of the pen.

"You see where the alien's nest is starting to spread across the ceiling?" he said and she nodded.

"What about it?" she said.

"Well we want to make sure that it doesn't get as far as that hatch up there that we use to drop food into the pen. If it does then the alien could try and escape through it."

"What will you do if it does?" Maddie said.

"Stop feeding the alien." the first researcher replied, "Hopefully it won't starve before the new facility is ready."

"New facility?" Maddie repeated, "Is that what we saw being built on our way down?" and one of the researchers nodded.

"Probably, yes. Miss Venice wants the aliens moved to a larger holding facility that allow us to put more than one of them together so we can see how they interact." he told her.

It was then that Maddie decided that it was time to try and gain information that she suspected Venice had lied about when she had spoken with the android and Williams.

"So what about all of the other eggs?" she asked, "The ones not used for implanting the chimpanzees?"

The two scientists glanced at one another nervously after she had said this, as if each one was waiting for the other to provide an answer.

"Err, perhaps you should ask Miss Venice about that." one of them said.

"Yes," the other agreed, "we've not had anything to do with the removal of the eggs from the ship. As far as we know these are the only ones that have been taken. The rest are still right where we found them."

"For safety reasons only androids have been allowed inside the ship." the first researcher continued. Maddie nodded.

"Okay, I'll speak to your boss if I need any more information like that. Now if you'll excuse me I have to make my report." Maddie said before she turned around and walked away from the two men, already working on a plan to exploit the little information she had. By telling her that the eggs had been taken from the alien spacecraft by androids they had given Maddie a means to obtain exact information about the ship and the eggs it contained. She knew from her own experience that an android's memory was perfect and this meant that the androids that had carried out the removal work would have a record of it in their memories and all Maddie had to do was access this.

"Something about that lieutenant doesn't feel right Oliver." Venice said as they watched Maddie standing outside the pen with the two researchers on one of the camera feeds in the command centre.

"I didn't notice." Oliver said.

"Of course not, you were too busy cowering in your boots from the moment the first marine came into sight with a gun, but I'm telling you that that is no ordinary marine. If she was then I doubt Captain Williams would have left her here alone, he'd either have taken her with him or left behind a couple of his troops to protect her."

"I thought we were supposed to be being co-operative." Oliver said, "Why would she need protecting?"

"Because Captain Williams doesn't entirely trust us. Of course leaving a bunch of gun-toting grunts behind would make it harder for Lieutenant Madison to adopt a low profile."

"Do you want me to have Mister Freeman put a watch on her?" Oliver suggested.

"No. Freeman's men are good soldiers but they're no more subtle than marines are. The only way we can realistically track her movements is if I can plant a monitoring device on her. Can you see what our technical section can whip up in a hurry and then contact me on channel seven?"

"Where will you be?" Oliver asked.

"Following our unwanted guest. I can probably keep tabs on her for a while."

Since arriving at the research facility she had seen a large number of androids, easily recognisable from the

identity badges that they wore and she sought out one of these in an isolated location where there were no human members of staff present to be able to order the android away from Maddie.

"Hey!" she called out when she saw one standing outside the infirmary conducting repairs.

"Yes lieutenant?" the android asked, turning to face Maddie.

"Can you answer a few questions for me?" she asked.

"I have been instructed to co-operate with you lieutenant." the android answered in a flat tone that suggested that although he had been built to resemble a human being as closely as possible he had been programmed with only the most basic of personalities. Maddie considered this to be a good thing. Androids were perfectly capable of lying but it required advanced programming that this one appeared to lack.

"Good. So tell me how many eggs were removed from the alien ship." Maddie said.

"I do not have that information lieutenant."

"Do you know where I might find the androids used to remove the eggs?"

"No lieutenant."

Maddie was considering trying to find a different android to interrogate when she realised that this particular one was obviously used in a maintenance role and she might have better results if she asked questions that related to this role.

"What happened to the eggs that were removed from the alien ship?" she asked.

"They were placed in secure storage." the android answered and Maddie smiled.

"Tell me where." she said, "Oh and tell me how to get there."

The door was located not far from the holding pens and was clearly marked 'EXTREME DANGER – NO HUMAN ADMITTANCE'. Maddie smiled when she saw this, everything being just as the service android had told her. Reaching for the door handle she found that the door was locked and would not open. Made of metal, the door appeared too strong for her to break down and for a moment she considered the possibility of using her pistol to shoot the lock. However, not only was she not confident about her ability to hit the right spot to destroy the lock and leave the door open, she also did not want the sound of a gunshot echoing down the hallways of the facility.

Instead she knelt down and looked at the locking mechanism. This consisted of an electronic keypad mounted beside the door. Although Maddie could make out where some of the printing on the keys was worn she could not tell what order these would have been pressed in or whether any were included more than once in the combination to open the door. It was also possible Maddie knew that different people and androids had different codes to access the room, meaning that not all of the worn keys would need to be pressed.

Reaching into her combat jacket she produced a pouch filled with fine work tools and taking out a screwdriver she quickly detached the keypad itself from the wall to expose the circuitry within. With this exposed it was easy to see where the output of the circuitry led to the lock itself, essentially a powerful magnet that held the door shut. As far as Maddie could tell there were no protective measures in place to prevent someone from simply interrupting the power to this and this suggested that if the room on the other side really was being used to store something as obviously valuable as the alien eggs taken from the derelict starship then either the room had not been intended for such a purpose when the facility had been constructed or Weyland-Yutani trusted the people it had sent here enough to not think any more security was needed. Of course Maddie also knew that the danger presented by the eggs themselves would also be enough to keep many people away from them. This meant that all Maddie had to do was cut through one of the wires leading to the electromagnet itself and then when she tried the door handle again she found that the door opened inwards.

Smiling to herself, Maddie slipped her tools back inside her jacket, put the keypad back in place and then went inside the room, closing the door behind her. As she did this she had no idea that Venice had been observing her from around a corner in the hallway outside.

"This is Venice," she said into her headset, "I'm outside the xenomorph storeroom. Tell Freeman to get down here with a team of his men immediately."

Inside the room on the other side of the door Maddie saw that it was filled with plastic drums of the exact same type as had been used to carry alien eggs onto the Sulaco after its departure from LV-426. As far as Maddie could tell there were several hundred of these stacked on top of one another in the room and all had their lids fitted, suggesting that there was something inside each one. As a test Maddie walked up to a pair of drums stacked together and attempted to lift the upper one. Sure enough the weight of this suggested that there was something inside and when Maddie set it down again she reached for the edge of the lid, slowly lifting it up at one side so that she could see inside. She had to use a pocket flash light to be able to see anything inside the drum but when she shone this through the small crack she had created between the lid and the drum she saw the all too familiar shape of an alien egg.

"This is Maddie, can you read me?" she said, activating her radio headset as she pressed the side of the lid close again before the egg could begin to but the only response was static and she frowned as she realised

that the room was too well shielded to allow her transmission to penetrate. She hurried back to the door and exited the room, facing the drums as she stepped backwards through the doorway but it was only when she turned around to face down the hallway that she saw the Weyland-Yutani commandos pointing their pulse rifles towards her while Venice stared at her.

Sighing, Maddie raised her hands.

"I surrender?" she said.

"Lieutenant Madison." Venice said as she strode up to Maddie and plucked her pistol from its holster, "I presume you found what you were looking for?" and then she took a deep breath from her cigarette before blowing the smoke in Maddie's face, causing the android to blink, "Take her away. Secure her in the infirmary. I'll be along to question her soon."

"Of course Miss Venice." Freeman replied and he signalled to two of his men to take Maddie into custody.

9.

"Captain I think you ought to take a look at this." Lawrence signalled.

"What is that?" Williams asked, looking at the feed from Lawrence's helmet camera. This showed an area of the trash covered ground near where the abandoned pulse rifle had been found.

"The ground looks melted." Devon said from behind where Lawrence was crouched.

"Not melted, corroded. Dissolved by acid." Lawrence said.

"Stay put, I'm on my way." Williams said before getting out of his seat and then making his way to the rack of spare pulse rifles kept in the APC. As he took one of these weapons and loaded it he glanced at the marine still sat in the driver's seat, "You too Perez." he said, "I want all the pairs of eyes out there that we can get." "Yes sir, but about the APC?" Perez responded as she shut off the vehicle's engine and got out of the driver's seat.

"We'll close the door so nothing can just wander in and I'm sure that our air cover will let us know if anyone tries to get near it. Now are you ready marine?" Williams said, slinging his rifle over his shoulder.

"Yes sir." Perez said.

"Good, then grab a flame unit and let's get going."

The two marines exited the APC, sliding the door shut again and Williams looked up into the sky where the two dropships were still circling.

"Kent. Dunham. Report." he signalled.

"A few signs of movement near the research facility but nothing threatening captain." Kent responded first, "I reckon we've got about another forty-five minutes to an hour of loitering time before we either need to set down or head back up to the *Almayer* and refuel."

"Ditto captain. No unusual activity spotted but we can't stay up here forever." Dunham added in agreement.

"Understood. But we'll need air cover for a while longer yet. Let me know when you reach thirty minutes of loitering time but in the meantime be aware that Perez and I have disembarked and are linking up with the others." Williams responded as he and Perez started to make their way across the landfill towards where Lawrence and the rest of the platoon's infantry were waiting.

"Captain, this is the rifle we found." Ellis said and he held up the abandoned pulse rifle, its display dark now that the magazine had been removed for safety, "There are Weyland-Yutani markings on the other side of the magazine well." he added and William nodded.

"No signs of whoever this belonged to?" he asked.

"Afraid not sir. But give that this whole area is just covered in trash its pretty difficult to track anyone who's been through here."

"Very well. Carry on sergeant." Williams said and then he and Perez continued on to where Lawrence was waiting with Bravo Team just a few metres away.

"This is it." Lawrence said, pointing to several places on the ground where the trash covering it looked to have been splashed by the highly acidic blood of an alien. As far as Williams could tell trash made from card, plastic and metal had been eaten away, "No signs of human blood mind you."

"Gunny! Look at this." Willis said suddenly as she noticed something among the trash under her feet and she reached down to pick up what was obviously a bullet casing.

"Over here." Lawrence said and Willis tossed the brass case to him.

"There are more." she added, using her foot to sweep aside some of the trash and exposing more bullet casings.

"And here's the pistol." Reagan added, picking up a pistol by the base of its butt and holding it up for the others to see.

Williams took the pistol and one of the bullet casings.

"These match." he said.

"Yeah, looks like someone was definitely shooting at one of those things." Lawrence agreed as he got to his feet and looked around, "Question is did it come from the company lab or out of the ship?" and he looked from the direction the research facility was in towards the derelict ship and back again.

"I want each team to go in a different direction." Williams said, "Look for anything that would indicate the presence of an alien life form or a weapon having been fired. Hurry it up as well, our air cover is running on a clock here."

Strapped to a wheeled trolley, Maddie had been pushed into an isolation room in the infirmary and was left there until Venice and Freeman entered in the company of a squad of commandos.

"Now lieutenant, how about you tell me just how much the Colonial Marine Corps knows about our operation here." Venice said.

"Everything." Maddie said, "We're just the first wave."

Venice laughed.

"Oh my dear you really aren't a very good liar. If your superiors who aren't on our payroll knew all about this operation then they would have shut us down already. There isn't enough money in the world to bribe our way out of what we've done. Even my own hands are dirty and for that reason I really can't let you go spilling the beans about what we have here. Beyond the legal consequences there are the financial ones. Right now Weyland-Yutani has exclusive rights to the alien creatures here, but if they should get into the public domain then-

"Then you don't get a bonus?" Maddie interrupted.

"Quite." Venice said.

"Well if you're going to kill me anyway then there's really no reason for me to tell you anything." Maddie replied.

"Oh my dear all I need to do is keep you quiet and if you were smart you'd realise the opportunity being presented to you here. Weyland-Yutani is always looking to recruit good executive material. You could have a good future with us." Venice said.

"I doubt it."

"Oh well, in that case I suppose I'll just have to try and be more persuasive." Venice said and she started to light up another cigarette.

"What are you going to do? Blow smoke in my face because that is really disgusting." Maddie commented.

"Oh no lieutenant, I've got something much better in mind." Venice said as she turned around and nodded at Freeman. In turn he opened the door to the isolation room.

"Bring it in." he said and then an android wheeled in a low trolley, the top of which was covered by a large bell-shaped piece of transparent material and inside this bell was an alien egg.

"Now we'll be waiting on the other side of that window," Venice said, pointing to a large window that allowed people outside the room to observe what was happening inside it without having to expose themselves to potential contagion, "and if you want to talk to us you can just shout. The intercom will pick up anything you say."

The humans then all turned around and walked out of the room before the door was closed with a 'thunk' as it was sealed air tight. Looking around as much as her restraints would allow, Maddie then saw Venice and Freeman appear at the window.

"Expose the egg please." Venice said over the intercom and the android standing beside the trolley lifted the transparent cover from it.

Setting this down beside the trolley the android then stood right beside the egg and leant in closer, at which point there came the sound of something moving about inside it. The android backed away as the top of the egg began to split apart and then the facehugger it contained came crawling out from inside. The facehugger then leapt from the top of the egg towards the android now stood in the corner, landing barely more than a metre away from it. The creature then skittered forwards while the android remained motionless and the facehugger stopped before reaching it. Maddie then watched as the facehugger turned around and began to scurry towards the trolley she was still strapped to.

"You may want to hurry lieutenant." Venice said over the intercom, "Mister Freeman's men can be inside that room in seconds but shooting that creature while it's too close to you could be harmful if any of its blood gets on you."

"You don't scare me." Maddie responded, "You or your pet."

"Something's wrong here." Freeman whispered to Venice, "If she knew anything about these creatures then she'd be terrified right now."

"She must think that she has a way out." Venice replied, "Are you sure that there aren't any other marines still in the facility?"

"Of course. My men locked this place down before they got here and we accounted for every single one of them when they turned up."

Just then the facehugger began to climb one of the trolley's wheeled legs and Venice smiled.

"Not long now Lieutenant Madison." Venice said as the facehugger crawled up onto Maddie's feet and she lifted her head to look at it.

"Shoo! Go away!" she said, trying her best to kick the creature off her but instead it came running up her legs and over her body. It made its way all the way up to her neck before it suddenly came to a stop and remained still.

"What happened?" Freeman said in disbelief, "Can they have some means of preventing themselves from being attacked?"

"No, of course not." Venice said, "There must be something about the lieutenant that the creature doesn't like." and then she looked towards the Weyland-Yutani android and frowned, "Of course." she hissed and she strode towards the sealed door to the isolation room, "Open up." she told the commandos standing outside, "I want that creature dealt with. But don't harm the prisoner."

"Yes ma'am." one of the commandos said and he reached to open the door while the other commando raised

his pulse rifle and stood ready to fire it.

As soon as the commandos stepped into the isolation room the facehugger leapt off Maddie's chest and began to run towards them, but they were prepared for this and both commandos opened fire simultaneously. The explosive tipped rounds from their pulse rifles shredded the facehugger before it could get close to them and there was a hissing sound as the spray from its acidic blood began to eat into the floor. "Someone get the vents on in here." Venice ordered as she stepped through the doorway behind the commandos, "Let's get rid of those fumes." and then she took another breath from her cigarette and blew out more smoke.

The acrid smell of the acid fumes was rapidly removed from the room and Venice walked over to Maddie and then stubbed her cigarette out on the back of Maddie's hand.

"Hey! That hurts!" Maddie snapped.

"Oh I don't think so." Venice replied as she looked at the wound and saw the characteristic milky white lubrication fluid seeping from it, "I must admit you had me fooled. You don't look like an ordinary Marine Corps android. Normally they look-"

"Old? Like you?" Maddie commented and Venice frowned.

"So what model are you?" she asked.

"One-twenty-nine four."

"A pleasure model?" Venice said, "Interesting. I'm surprised that Captain Williams could afford you on a marine's salary. Or does this explain his interest here? Are you a bribe from a competing company?"

"No. Not that it's any of your business but he won me playing poker against a colonel on your payroll. Now I belong to him so back off because he's taken."

"Hah!" Venice exclaimed, "If I'm going to be spreading my legs for a marine he'll be a general. Captain Williams can keep his little sex doll. Now if you're down here then I'm guessing that there isn't actually anyone up on your ship at all."

"Can you take that chance?" Maddie said but Venice just smiled at her. Then she walked back out of the room and to the closest intercom set and called the command centre, "Open a channel to the *Almayer*. Let me know if it connects directly or relays back to the surface." she ordered.

"Establishing link now Miss Venice." Oliver responded from the command centre and then a moment later he added, "That's odd. We're picking up a relay signal."

"Okay forget the link, you've told me all I needed to know." Venice said and then she put the intercom handset back down and turned towards Freeman, "Over to you Freeman." she said, "Take out those marines."

"My pleasure." he responded.

The electronics suite aboard a UD-4L Cheyenne dropship could detect hostile sensor sweeps and weapon locks, responding automatically by activating the onboard electronic countermeasures and deploying decoys to confuse the guidance systems of missiles but they could not protect against an unguided weapon that was aimed visually. The best defence against such an attack was speed but with the two dropships providing continual close support to ground units their speed was being kept to a minimum. Therefore, when units of Weyland-Yutani commandos moved a pair of light automatic cannons into position and fired them into the air they made easy targets.

The *Sheriff Squirrel* was hit first, several explosive tipped projectiles punching holes in the side of the fuselage where one of the thrust vectoring nozzles was located and this triggered an explosion that took out the entire side of the dropship and tore off the weapons pods on that side. The sound of alarms then filled the cockpit as the craft tumbled towards the ground.

"Eject!" Kent yelled but as he reached for the ejection lever above his head another burst of ground fire tore open the cockpit as well and both he and Midland were killed instantly.

Meanwhile aboard the *Little Grey Man* Dunham and Sanders hunted for the source of the attack. The commandos had made sure not to use tracer ammunition so that they did not immediately give away their location when they opened fire. However, there was no way that they could keep the barrel and chamber of their cannon from heating up and when Sanders saw the glowing cannon through the dropship's thermal imaging sensors she knew what she was looking at.

"Target bearing one nine seven!" she exclaimed.

"Got them, bringing us around. Arm Zeus rockets and return fire." Dunham responded and he turned the dropship sharply to bring its weapons to bear on the source of the attack.

Freeman's men were prepared for this though and while the *Little Grey Man* was still turning the second cannon opened fire. The round from this struck the closest of the dropship's engine pods, triggering an explosion that consumed the entire dropship while still in the air.

Now that the marines had been stripped of their air cover the commandos switched to more advanced weapons to engage their APCs. A pair of M112 HIMAT missile launchers had been erected in dead ground while their operators had moved forwards far enough to get a direct line of sight to the two armoured

vehicles. HIMAT stood for Hypervelocity Intelligent Missile, Anti-Tank and the weapons were designed to be able to target the weakest points on a vehicles armour from above without the operator having to do anything other than identify a target. Using their remote triggers the commandos launched their missiles at the APCs in rapid succession. Each of these initially shot straight up into the air as the missiles' own onboard sensors locked onto the vehicles and determined the optimum target point for detonation before levelling out and then plunging down towards their targets.

The empty APC of Alpha Team was an easy target and the HIMAT struck it just forwards of the turret. The warhead easily penetrated the roof of the APC and the blast was directed straight down into the main internal compartment. This was filled with fire in an instant and the sudden and massive increase in pressure caused the hatches and forward vision port to all explode outwards as the APC continued to burn furiously.

Sat in the second APC Brown activated the vehicle's defensive systems as soon as he saw the *Sheriff Squirrel* hit and the automated targeting system immediately began to search for targets. Detecting the incoming HIMAT, the APC's computer swung the forward dual 20mm cannon turret towards it and opened fire. However, the missile was closing far too rapidly for the APC's targeting system to calculate a proper firing solution in time to intercept it mid-flight and it came flying down to strike the front of the APC. The explosion blew the entire front section of the vehicle off, destroying the defensive cannons and killing Brown before he could attempt to escape.

The marines outside their vehicles had dived for cover as soon as they had heard the first shots and they stayed low as pieces of the destroyed transports fell around them.

"Can anyone see where the fire is coming from?" Williams called out as he risked a look upwards.

"The missiles came from there and there." Lawrence responded, indicating the directions from which the HIMATs had been launched. Williams was about to order the platoon to counter attack when the Weyland-Yutani commandos launched the final phase of their assault, intended to finish off the marines.

"Mortars!" Ellis yelled when he first heard the whistling sound created by the falling mortar rounds and then there was an explosion as the bomb landed. This was accompanied by screams as one of the marine squads was caught up in the blast.

"Brubaker and Willis are dead." Corporal Barns shouted out.

"We're sitting ducks out here captain." Lawrence said and Williams nodded.

"Fall back to the alien ship." Williams ordered and the marines stared at him, "I'm not going to repeat myself." he added.

"Captain are you sure that-" Ellis began, remembering the reason for the warnings about not entering the derelict alien vessel.

"The captain knows what he's doing sergeant." Lawrence interrupted.

"Yes I do. Venice will never let her men use heavy weapons against that ship. Now let's move." Williams said and he leapt to his feet and started to run towards the alien ship. The other marines copied this even as a second mortar round fell from the sky to land right where the marines had just been.

The mortars continued to fire, chasing the marines towards the alien ship and the commandos adjusted their fire to try and land rounds ahead of them instead. Another round landed close enough to the marines that one of Alpha Team's two squads was blown off their feet and the others rushed to help them.

"Corporal Schmidt's gone." Lawrence said as he rolled the squad leader over and the man's lifeless eyes stared back up at him.

"Same with Lee." Ellis added.

"Miller and Garcia are still alive." Fenton called out, "We need to move them quickly so I can take a look at their injuries."

It was straight forward enough for a pair of marines to pick Miller up and carry him between them him towards the alien vessel but before Garcia could be moved the harness mounting his smart gun had to be removed and as another mortar round landed not far away this felt like it was taking an age.

"Hurry up." Williams called out.

"We're set." Lawrence replied as he and Ellis lifted the unconscious Garcia and the marines began to move again, still being driven by the mortar fire towards the derelict alien spacecraft.

However, the marines were not alone in being chased from the area by the barrage and there was a screeching sound as an alien came charging around the large pile of trash that the commandos had sighted their mortar behind to keep it hidden from the marines. Taken by surprise the unit of four commandos could do nothing as the creature pounced on the first of them and dismembered the screaming man. The alien leapt to the next commando just as the man was attempting to unslung his pulse rifle and he was knocked to the ground before the alien opened it mouth wide and the inner set of jaws shot out to punch a hole in the commando's forehead.

The second alien then appeared, dropping down onto another of the commandos from the top of the trash pile and tearing at the man with its teeth. The final commando fired a defiant burst of fire from his rifle that clipped the tail of one of the aliens and blew a chunk of flesh from it but this only served to make both aliens focus on him instead and they charged at him simultaneously, crashing into him from both sides before they

proceeded to maul him to death.

Oblivious to the reason for their salvation, all that the marines knew was that the mortar fire had suddenly ceased and they continued to run towards the derelict ship.

"There's an opening right ahead." Lawrence said, remembering the first opening sealed off with tape that his squad had come across.

The marines did not slow down for the tape, breaking through it with ease before coming to a halt just inside the relative safety of the alien ship.

"Preston, Manchester, keep that hole covered." Williams ordered and the platoon's two smart gun operators still active positioned themselves just within the ship to cover the approach to it that they had taken.

"Torres get over here and help Fenton with these men." Lawrence added and each of the two corpsmen began to inspect the injuries of the two injured marines.

"I want a full check done on our equipment." Williams ordered, "Without the gear stowed in our APCs we're limited to what we're carrying so I want to know what that amounts to. Gunnery Sergeant Lawrence, with me." and then he and Lawrence moved further along the passageway where the hole in the side of the ship opened up into to discuss their options.

"I don't like this place." Lawrence said, looking at the strange bio-mechanical nature of the walls around them.

"I don't blame you, but right now this ship is all that's stopping Venice's men from bombarding us." Williams replied and Lawrence nodded.

"Odd that they stopped firing that mortar at us right when they had us in their sights though." he said.

"Yes it is and while I'm grateful for whatever the reason was I can't help but think that they encountered a bigger problem." Williams said.

"You mean an alien?"

"Possibly more than one. Venice told Maddie and myself that they lost two of their test subjects when they tried to find a way of safely removing the facehugger stage of the alien's life cycle but I'm starting to wonder whether maybe they managed to lose two later on. Of course another possibility is that not all of the aliens current here were bred by Weyland-Yutani." Williams said and he looked around at the ship, "Somewhere in here there are supposed to be thousands of alien eggs. Perhaps some of Venice's people were exposed and she either didn't know about it or didn't bother telling us."

"I can think of something worse." Lawrence said.

"What?"

"We don't know how long these things live. What if there's a nest of them in here with us and they're starting to wake up?"

"That is worse." Williams said, "Can you take a squad of men and check out as much of this ship as possible? I'd like to know just how safe our hiding place is."

"I knew I should have kept my mouth shut." Lawrence replied before turning back towards the other marines.

"Oh and I suggest you make sure that you take a couple of flame units with you." Williams added.

The other marines were still checking their equipment while Fenton and Torres tended to the two injured marines.

"Okay O'Hern, Perez, Teller and Reagan, you're with me." Lawrence announced, "Perez and Reagan I want your flame units in front. Teller get that tracker on line"

"Where are we going gunny?" Corporal O'Hern asked.

"To check out the rest of this ship." Lawrence replied, "We need to make certain that we're alone."

"Sergeant Ellis you should go as well." Williams added and then he looked at Lawrence, "If you need to split your squad I'd rather have a sergeant with each section."

"Okay. We'll check in every ten minutes." Lawrence replied and then he pointed in the same direction he and Williams had headed in for their conversation, "We'll start down here." he said and the six marines began to walk away, those armed with flame units positioning themselves at the front of the group so that they had clear lines of fire.

While Lawrence was leading the patrol away Williams went to check on the condition of the injured marines.

"How are they?" he asked.

"I'll be fine captain." Miller responded and then he looked at Torres, "Right doc?"

"That's the morphine talking. He needs blood." Torres said and then Williams glanced down at where Miller's right leg was covered in blood from the wound caused by a piece of shrapnel from the mortar round that had embedded itself in his thigh. The jagged preformed fragment looked something like a long barbed nail and it now lay on the floor close by after Torres had cut through Miller's leg muscle to be able to extract it.

"I take we have compatible donors?" Williams asked and Torres nodded.

"Yeah, I'll find someone I can drain a pint from and hook them up." he said.

"And what about Garcia?" Williams said, turning towards Fenton.

"I think it's a concussion." Fenton replied, "He's still out cold but he appears stable. We should really get him into a scanner though, just in case there's any internal bleeding."

"We'll need to get him back to the *Almayer* for that." Torres pointed out.

"Excuse me captain, but how are we going to get back to the *Almayer*? We don't have a transmitter that can reach orbit." Corporal Barns asked and Williams looked at her and then out through the hole in the side of the ship.

"No, but they do." he said as he stared at the large communications array constructed near the centre of the Weyland-Yutani research facility, "So once we've dealt with them we'll be able to signal the *Almayer* to land and pick us up."

10.

"What's going on?" Venice asked as she rushed into the command centre. Here Freeman was stood in front of a set of display screen not very dissimilar to the set up used to monitor the aliens in their pens. However, each of these displays showed the name of one of Freeman's commandos in the bottom corner to identify which of them the feed came from.

"You need to see this." Freeman responded, "We managed to take out the marines' dropships and both APCs. The marines themselves were dismounted at the time and they started falling back towards the alien ship. Captain Williams was among them. He was seen by our forward observers."

"Well they need to be stopped. I'm not telling the board of directors that we destroyed a priceless example of alien technology just to get rid of a few grunts."

"I counted on the marines being outside of their transports and deployed a light mortar." Freeman explained, "They managed to put a few round among the marines but it turns out that there was more hiding among the trash than just a few grunts as you put it." and then he reached down to control panel he was stood at, setting one of the feeds to replay the last minute or so of footage it had recorded, "Take a look at this." he added.

Lighting up a cigarette, Venice looked at the monitor Freeman pointed out to her and watched the footage.

"I don't get it." she said as she watched the commandos loading and firing their mortar.

"Wait for it. Here it comes." Freeman said without taking his eyes off the screen.

"Here what-" Venice began and then she gasped as all of a sudden the monitor showed an alien leap into view and attack one of the other commandos. What happened next was difficult to follow as the commando whose feed they were watching hurried to retrieve his pulse rifle to defend himself with. The last thing the monitor showed before it went black was the wide open mouth of an alien as the smaller set of secondary jaws inside it shot out and killed the commando.

For a few moments Venice just stood in silence, staring at the now blank monitor as her cigarette burned down in her hand.

"None of our specimens are missing." she said calmly.

"No but did you notice the configuration of those xenomorphs? They were significantly more slender than ours. I'd say that it hatched from a human." Freeman said.

"Could it have come from the colony at Hadley's Hope and survived the explosion? Or maybe not all of the colonists impregnated were taken back." Venice said.

"That's possible I suppose, though I think a far more likely answer to the question of where this alien came from can be found closer to home. No one can confirm having seen Allen or Mayer since you gave them permission to study the hull of the alien ship. We assumed that they just deserted in the panic after the explosion and the destruction of the Razumov. What if they didn't? What if they went inside the ship instead of just studying the outside? If they were attacked while inside then the aliens that would have hatched from them would be full grown by now."

"We have four men unaccounted for." Venice pointed out, "Allen and Mayer and those two techs who went missing while taking out the trash. If the aliens were nesting in our waste dump then they could have been attacked as well."

"Yes." Freeman replied, nodding, "The last two haven't been missing for long so I doubt anything will have hatched from them yet but if they were taken as hosts then we'll be dealing with four wild aliens very soon. Plus the marines, who after my men were killed by the aliens made it to the ship by the way."

"Damn." Venice hissed.

"I've ordered my men back here and I suggest we lock down the facility completely." Freeman said, "I could send a team to hunt down the aliens but the problem there is that they'd be vulnerable to being ambushed by the marines as well. Any force strong enough to stand a realistic chance of taking on the marines in a stand up fight would require weakening our defences seriously. We didn't come here to fight a war against marines at the same time as fighting an army of aliens. We're just supposed to be a security detachment."

"We need to deal with the marines first." Venice said, "If we let them stay holed up inside that ship then we run the risk of them becoming more hosts for the aliens. Do we have any nerve gas?"

"We've never tested it on the aliens. It could damage the remaining eggs inside the ship." Freeman pointed out.

"I know that but it's a risk I'm willing to take. We already have more than a hundred of the eggs in storage. That's more than enough to create a viable test population. Our priority right now has to be to secure that ship."

"Someone's been here before us." Reagan said, pointing to the floor of the passageway the marines had just

climbed into using a hole from the level below.

"This ship looks like it's been here centuries." Teller commented.

"Maybe, but I don't think these tracks have." Lawrence said as he crouched down to inspect the mark left on the floor by the last people to come down the passage, "That tread pattern is pretty much the same as ours." "Weyland-Yutani?" Ellis suggested.

"Perhaps." Lawrence replied, "But it could also have been the colonists who found this ship. Look, there's another set that's smaller and has a different tread pattern. In either case I think we should follow them. If nothing else it gives us a point of reference for our search. Teller, are you picking anything up on your tracker?"

Teller lifted his motion tracker and as the other marines stood still while he scanned he turned from side to side to search in both directions for signs of movement.

"Nothing." he said, "This place still looks dead."

"Yeah, something we're going to be if we stay here too long." Perez muttered.

"You better move quicker than Perez." Ellis said, "After all, you're on point."

"That way." Lawrence said, pointing down the passageway. The tracks ran in both directions and he reasoned that the older ones, those below the freshest, would have been made on the way in while the newer ones that partially covered these would be heading back out of the ship.

The marines continued to follow this passageway that seemed to angle upwards as it went until Reagan came to a stop and raised his fist as a sign to the others to do the same.

"What do you see?" Lawrence asked.

"I think the passageway ends up ahead gunny." Reagan answered, "It's not blocked but the wall ends so I think it opens out."

"Teller. Motion tracker." Ellis ordered and the marine checked the tracker again.

"Negative on movement." he reported.

"Okay let's see what we've found." Lawrence said, "But stay alert. If we have found a major compartment then it could be where all those eggs are supposed to be."

"What do we do if it is gunny?" Perez asked.

"What else?" Lawrence said, "We ask Captain Williams what he wants doing with them. My guess is that there's a reason he made sure we had incinerator units with us. Reagan, you first."

Reagan nodded and then dashed forwards to the opening at the end of the passageway. Just as he had expected this opened onto a large chamber that was accessible by a short ramp at the end of the passage. Looking around he saw that the large chamber was roughly circular in configuration and included a large raised section where the most significant feature of the chamber was located.

"Gunny!" he called out, "You need to come and see this."

"What is it?" Lawrence replied as the other marines hurried to join Reagan at the end of the passageway.

"I think it was the pilot." Reagan said.

The figure Reagan had identified as the pilot appeared roughly humanoid but was massive in scale compared to an ordinary person and had it not been slumped in what looked like a control station of some kind would have stood at least three metres tall. Like everything else about the ship, the body of the pilot looked to have been here a long time and it was difficult to tell where the chair it was sat in and the body began.

"Think he was killed in the crash?" Ellis said.

"I don't think so." Lawrence replied as he walked around the control station to examine the body from all angles, "In fact I think the cause of death is somewhat obvious." and he pointed towards the pilot's chest where what looked like one of its ribs was bent outwards.

"So he had one of those things inside him as well?" Perez said.

"It sure looks that way." Lawrence said.

"Take a look at this." Teller called out from across the room and when the other marines looked towards him they saw him standing by something that obviously did not belong on the ship. There was a hole in the floor of the compartment and beside that there was a lightweight winch that was of obvious human manufacture. It too had an old appearance to it but its age was probably measured in years or decades rather than the hundreds or thousands of years since the alien ship had crashed here on LV-426.

"There's a tag." Ellis said as he inspected the winch and discovered an identification plate that tied the winch to the inventory of a starship, "*USCSS Nostromo*."

"Nostromo. I know that name from somewhere." Teller commented.

"You should. It was in the reports you were supposed to read before we left Gateway." Lawrence said, "The *Nostromo* was the freighter that set down here more than fifty years ago and found this ship along with its contents. Obviously the crew came this way."

"And left in such a hurry they left their winch behind." O'Hern said.

Peering into the hole beside the winch Lawrence could see nothing so he reached into his webbing and took out a chemical light stick and after igniting it he tossed it into the hole, watching as it fell. The light stick

tumbled as it fell but the space beneath the hole was large enough that nothing was illuminated by the pale chemical glow until the stick finally landed on a solid surface far below the hole and then rolled beneath something and vanished.

"That's a long way down gunny." Ellis said and Lawrence nodded.

"Then let's see if that winch still works." he replied.

A quick test of the winch's motor proved that in the time it had spent in the alien ship the battery had gone flat but there was a manual crank fitted to the mechanism as well and Lawrence unravelled a long length of the metallic cable from the drum while the other marines righted the device and set it up over the hole. Taking a second light stick from his webbing Lawrence hooked this to the end of the cable and began to feed it through the hole, lowering the cable down until he saw that the end had reached the floor beneath. While he was doing this the other marines were putting on kevlar lined gloves that would allow them to slide down the cable without taking the skin off the palms of their hands.

"Perez pass me that flame unit." Lawrence said as he put on his own gloves and when Perez handed him the weapon he slung it over his shoulder, "Okay I'll go down first. Perez, when I give the all clear you're next and then everyone else one at a time."

Wrapping the cable around his leg, Lawrence then grasped it tightly in his gloved hands before stepping into the hole and letting the cable take his weight. Releasing his grip slightly Lawrence then let the cable slide through his grasp and in turn he slid down into the darkness. It took about thirty seconds for him to reach the bottom and as he unslung the flame unit from over his shoulder he looked around only to have his worst suspicions confirmed. The chamber he was now stood in had the appearance of a vast cavern that had a floor divided up into sections by what looked like low walls arranged in a grid pattern, but it was what lay in these individual areas that chilled Lawrence's blood to his bones.

Every one that he could see was filled with hundreds of alien eggs.

"Captain Williams do you read me?" he transmitted but there was no response from Williams, the structure of the alien ship blocking the short ranged transmissions of his personal radio. Instead Lawrence decided to start bringing the rest of his unit down after, "Perez get down here and be damned careful. We've found the hatchery."

While he waited for Perez to make the descent from what he now thought of as the alien ship's bridge Lawrence was tempted to use the flame unit in his hands to burn as many of the eggs as the fuel in it would allow. The problem with that plan was that he knew the fuel would run out long before he could destroy even a small portion of the eggs and the flame unit would be left useless if it was needed again. Therefore, since the eggs appeared dormant enough for now he opted to nothing.

Perez soon landed Lawrence and he handed the weapon back to the other marine who also looked at their surroundings and when he saw the eggs that surrounded he cursed strongly.

"How many are there gunny?" he added as Lawrence was unslinging his pulse rifle.

"Enough for someone to create an army of those creatures." Lawrence replied. Then looking up at the hole they had dropped through he activated his radio, "Okay, next one."

"Reagan you're up." Ellis ordered, "Then O'Hern, then Teller and I'll bring up the rear."

One by one the marines slid down the cable and all were shocked when they saw the size of the cavern filled with alien eggs.

"There's no way we can destroy all of these." Teller said when he landed.

"Sure we can." Lawrence replied, "The captain just needs to drop one nuke from orbit and they'll all be vaporised like that." and he clicked his fingers. Then he looked upwards, "Ellis, your turn." he said.

"Copy that gunny." Ellis replied, slinging his pulse rifle over his shoulder before reaching to take hold of the cable. However, just as he was about to slide down he saw something move out of the corner of his eye above him and he lifted his head to see what it was just in time to see an adult alien lunge at him from an opening in the ceiling. Startled, Ellis let go of his grip on the cable just enough that he fell through the hole, plummeting downwards with his limbs flailing and screaming out loud.

"Ellis!" Lawrence yelled when he saw this.

The marine sergeant was not the only one to fall through the hole, however. Now that he was no longer where he had been, the alien crashed into the frame of the winch and it collapsed sideways. Meanwhile the alien itself also fell through the hole, letting out a loud shrieking sound as it dropped rapidly as well.

Ellis landed on one of the walls that separated the different groups of eggs but bounced and rolled off, dropping into one of the egg filled areas. As he landed on the floor and finally came to a halt he made no sound and remained motionless, lay face down at the bottom of the wall.

"Sarge!" Teller yelled and he moved to try and pull Ellis to safety. However, before he could take more than a single step Lawrence reached out and grabbed him.

"Look out!" he shouted as the alien then dropped into the same egg filled section of the chamber as Ellis, landing close beside the motionless sergeant.

Stunned by the force of the impact, the alien flexed its limbs and tail as if testing them for injury. Then, satisfied that it was not seriously injured it hissed as it began to rise to its feet. At the same time as it did this

however, both Lawrence and Teller dropped to a kneeling position as they brought up their pulse rifles and took aim.

"Short bursts!" Lawrence snapped as he squeezed the trigger of his pulse rifle and both he and Teller fired rapid bursts of explosive tipped rounds into the alien. Struck repeatedly the alien's torso was blasted apart as the rounds detonated inside it and pieces of it fell all around, creating another hissing sound as the acidic blood that sprayed out in all directions began to attack the structure of the alien starship.

"What about the sarge?" O'Hern asked, looking where Ellis still lay motionless on the floor. Luckily for Ellis the spray of acidic blood and body parts had missed him entirely so he appeared to be in no immediate danger, but then to the marines' horror the top of a nearby egg began to peel open.

Lawrence reacted quickly and fired another burst from his weapon that blew both the top of the egg and also the facehugger that it contained apart, but the area around Ellis still held dozens more of them.

"Flame units, torch those eggs." Lawrence ordered as he slung his rifle and rushed along the wall the marines were stood on towards where Ellis lay.

Twin jets of flame shot from the marines' incinerators. These were initially aimed at the eggs closest to where Ellis lay, establishing a zone of fire around the unconscious marine before Perez and Reagan moved on to the other eggs in this particular area. Meanwhile Teller ran after Lawrence just as he was leaping down from the wall to check on Ellis. As he landed a nearby egg that had been too close to be targeted with the flame units without risking Ellis began to open.

"Gunny look out!" Teller yelled but Lawrence was already aware of the danger and he reached for his sidearm, drawing the pistol just as the facehugger began to crawl from the egg. He fired repeatedly at the facehugger and the creature convulsed as the pistol rounds struck its body, blowing off one of its limbs before the facehugger dropped to the floor and stopped moving. Again there was a hissing sound as its blood began to eat away at the floor beneath it and only then was Lawrence satisfied that the creature was dead and he returned his pistol to its holster.

"How's Sergeant Ellis?" Teller asked.

"Alive." Lawrence replied, "But he won't be for much longer if we can't get him out of here."

11.

When one of Freeman's commandos entered the infirmary's isolation ward with a technician they found Maddie still strapped to the trolley, her head tilted sideways with her mouth and eyes open and unmoving. "Huh, I guess someone's already shut it down." the technician said, "I thought we were supposed to do that." "I'm just here to make sure it doesn't try to escape. No-one told me anything." the commando responded, "Now let's get it to the workshop and then it's someone else's problem." accompanied by the commando, the technician walked up to the wheeled trolley and was about release the brake when he smiled.

"What?" the commando asked.

"You know this is supposedly a pleasure model." the technician replied.

"So? So what?"

"So that means its supposed to be the perfect representation of the human form. Don't you want to see what perfection looks like?"

"You were ordered to move it. Not molest it." the commando told the technician.

"And I will, I just want to take a quick look." the technician said and to make undressing Maddie easier he went along her body and released the strap holding her down.

The moment that the last strap was released Maddie suddenly lifted her head and kicked the technician in his stomach with the heel of her boot. Her behavioural inhibitor prevented Maddie from inflicting harm on any human and so the blow was limited in its strength to what was necessary for her immediate defence.

However, it was still enough to make him double over in pain, gasping for breath as he dropped to his knees and clutched at his stomach.

Maddie then leapt from the trolley and dived at the commando even as he was drawing his pistol. Grabbing hold of him by his wrist she wrested the weapon from his grasp and pushed the man aside. Then as he landed beside the technician she darted towards the door, spinning back around and pointing the pistol back towards the two men.

"Freeze!" she snapped, "Now hand over your radios."

The commando frowned as he reached for the radio clipped to his belt but beside him the technician just groaned.

"She's a robot dumbass." he gasped, "She can't shoot us."

"Oh crap. I was hoping you wouldn't remember that." Maddie said and then she hurled the pistol towards the commando, aiming just to the side of head so that he ducked as she dived through the open doorway and then slammed it shut, quickly engaging the quarantine seal so that the two men could not open it from the inside. She knew that they could easily summon someone to let them out but in the time that would take Maddie hoped to be far away and she ran to the exit from the infirmary and peered out into the hallway before making her escape.

Maddie's first idea was to head for the main entrance to the facility, but she suspected that that way out would be well guarded by now. In her exploration of the facility she had seen numerous emergency exits but all of these were likely to be alarmed and given that her tool kit had been confiscated along with her other equipment she did not think that escaping through one of these without giving away her position was a good prospect.

"Intruder alert!" a voice suddenly announced over the facility's public address system, "The android has escaped from confinement. All personnel be on alert. Report all sightings to either command or security immediately."

This concerned Maddie, her marine uniform meant that she stood out and now that the staff had been alerted to her escape they would be hunting for her. Two obvious solutions occurred to Maddie, she could adjust her appearance by changing her clothes for something less conspicuous but to do this she would first have to locate suitable clothing. Her knowledge of the facility's layout meant that she knew exactly where the laundry, the most likely source of such a disguise was located but it was too far away for her to stand a realistic change of reaching it unobserved. The second option was to avoid being seen at all. The sheer size of the facility meant that not all of it could realistically be covered by CCTV but key areas still were and by random chance Maddie could encounter a member of its staff in almost any room or hallway so if she was going to keep out of sight she needed to find another way to move around and looking up she saw exactly what she needed to do just this.

Maddie was just about able to reach the ventilation grill and luckily for her it was held in place using cheap spring clips rather than being screwed down. This meant she was able to pop it out of place simply by reached up and feeding her finger through the wire grill before simply pulling it towards her. Rather than just drop the grill on the floor Maddie then pushed it into the vent before dragging herself up after it. Though

cramped, the vent was large enough for Maddie to be able to crawl down it on her hands and knees, a feature intended to make maintenance easier by allowing work crews to carry out their work from any point inside the vent. However, Maddie did not start to crawl right away. Instead she picked up the grill and carefully fed it back through the hole it had come from and then turned it so that she could pull it back into place, removing all evidence of where she had gone. Only then did she begin to crawl along the vent. At this point she did not have a precise destination in mind but she reasoned that by keeping on the move she made herself a harder target.

O'Hern and Teller carried the unconscious Ellis as Lawrence's group of marines carefully made their way through the hold of the alien starship, keeping to the narrow grid of pathways formed by the tops of the walls that divided up the chamber into smaller sections. They noticed holes in the walls that could have been exits from the hold but all of these were located high up near the ceiling where the marines would have difficulty reaching them even without having to carry the weight of Ellis. As well as studying the walls, the alien eggs were of great interest to the marines who wanted to make sure that they had advanced warning should any of them begin to open and so every cluster of eggs that they passed was inspected to see if any were open. To begin with every clutch of eggs appeared the same, dormant and motionless but as the marines continued through the hold Reagan spotted something in the beam of his shoulder mounted lamp. "Gunny!" he hissed, dropping to his knees and raising his flame unit.

"What is it?" Lawrence asked as he turned his head and then saw what had attracted Reagan's attention. The other marine was looking at a section of the hold located up against one of the massive curved walls and several of the eggs within this section were open and empty. However, these were not the most significant detail about this part of the hold. Instead that fell to the human presence there.

Two sets of remains were located close to the far wall, directly beneath one of the openings located close to the ceiling. Both of these appeared to have died recently but the flesh had been largely devoured by something, leaving just scraps left on gnawed bones. However, there were more bodies that were far more intact. There were half a dozen of these and all were largely encased in the aliens' secreted resin, binding them to the lower wall surrounding this clutch of eggs. Two of the bodies were dressed in workers' overalls with the Weyland-Yutani emblem clearly marked on what was left of their chests after infant aliens had burst out through their rib cages. Meanwhile the remaining four were all Weyland-Yutani commandos and their chests appeared intact. Two of the imprisoned men had alien facehuggers still attached to them while the final two did not and Lawrence recognised these as the two men he had encountered standing guard over the alien ship hours earlier and had last been seen making their way back towards the research facility. One of the men appeared unharmed despite being encased against the wall in resin, while the second had significant burns to his face that had yet to heal.

"Cover me." Lawrence said as he made his way around the wall until he reached the point where the two commandos who had no facehuggers attached to them were imprisoned and he reached down to check the pulse of the apparently uninjured one.

The moment that his fingers touched the commando's neck the man's eyes opened wide.

"Help me!" he yelled, tugging at the resin restraining him, "Get me out of this before one of those things attaches itself to me."

"Teller, O'Hern, get over here." Lawrence said, "Perez and Reagan be ready with those incinerators. I want all these eggs torched if-" and then as he looked at the alien eggs he suddenly stopped talking.

"What are you waiting for?" the commando said, "Get me out of here damn it."

"Eight." Lawrence said.

"What do mean 'eight'?" the commando said as Lawrence stood up again, "Just get me out of this stuff. Hurry."

"There are eight eggs open." Lawrence said, "Plus there are six dead and two live facehuggers, that's one for each egg."

"So? So what? If you leave me here then number nine could hatch at any moment."

"It doesn't have to. You've already been attacked." Lawrence said, "There's one of those things growing inside you right now and it could hatch out at any time."

"No, no I'd remember that. For the love of God help me." the commando said.

"We can't." O'Hern said.

"You can't just leave me here to die."

"What else can we do?" Teller asked, looking at his fellow marines.

"Help him the only way we can." Lawrence said and he took one of the grenades from the front of his webbing, "Get clear. I'll catch up with you." he told the other marines and then he watched as his men resumed making their way along the wall, putting as much distance between them and the imprisoned commando as they could.

"Wait, you can't do this." the commando called out, "There has to be a way to-" and then he suddenly coughed and droplets of blood appeared on his chin, "No!" he gasped and then he screamed as he began to

convulse. Knowing that another of the aliens was about to burst from the commando's chest Lawrence knew that he had to act immediately.

"Fire in the hole!" he yelled and the other marines dropped into prone positions, lying flat on the top of the wall as Lawrence primed the grenade in his hand and dropped it down towards the screaming commando. Then as the grenade's timer began to count down Lawrence jumped down from the wall into the adjacent section of the hold, keeping as close to the wall and as far from and of the eggs as he could. He just had time to unsling his pulse rifle when he heard an inhuman screeching sound that told him the alien that had grown inside the commando's chest had just been born, but before the creature could crawl fully free of its host the grenade's timer elapsed and it exploded. The resultant fireball and cloud of shrapnel killed the infant chestburster instantly, taking with it the other unfortunate commandos who died without ever knowing the grisly fate that would otherwise have awaited them.

"Gunny!" he heard Perez call out, "Are you okay?"

"I will be as soon as I get back out of here." Lawrence shouted, tossing his pulse rifle up onto the wall and then hurriedly climbing after it before any of the alien eggs could hatch. As soon as he had his rifle back in his hands Lawrence looked down into the section of the hold he had just dropped the grenade into and surveyed the damage. While much of the blast had gone straight up, the walls surrounding the grenade had served to focus the damage it inflicted and this had dealt with most of the alien eggs in the section. A few that had been farthest away had survived but the others had either been burned up by the fireball or torn open by shrapnel. A slight movement caught Lawrence's eye and for a moment he thought that the chestburster had perhaps survived the grenade somehow until he saw that the movement was from a pair of facehuggers that had been ripped from their eggs, both missing several limbs and most of their tails as they flailed about. Most importantly Lawrence saw that all of the men who had been encased against the walls were now dead, taking the growing aliens inside them with them as well.

"Gunny?" O'Hern called out.

"I'm fine." Lawrence said before he quickly brought his pulse rifle up to his shoulder and then fired two rapid bursts, one into each of the already crippled facehuggers to finish them off just in case they proved to still be mobile, "Let's get out of here. Captain Williams needs to know we may not be alone in this place and that Weyland-Yutani are the least of our worries now." he added.

Even without pausing at every grill to check where she was, Maddie was able to calculate her position within the facility with a high degree of accuracy thanks to her complete recall of its layout and size. Soon after she had begun to crawl she had determined that the best place for her to head for was the command centre.

Despite this being guaranteed to be filled with Weyland-Yutani personnel, both operations staff and security, being able to observe what was going on in there would enable Maddie to gather as much intelligence about the dispositions of the rest of their forces before she decided on a plan of escape.

Moving through the vents was not totally without risk however, Maddie had to pause whenever she heard anyone outside the vent just in case they heard her and sometimes this meant she had to back up and try a different route when it became apparent that whoever it was would not be going away any time soon. From her internal clock she knew that took her almost an hour of careful crawling to reach her intended destination and she peered through a grill into the main command centre. In there she saw that the control stations she had seen when Venice had shown her and Williams the aliens on the security monitors were still manned but now there was an additional station operational. Like the station used to monitor the aliens this consisted of a central console in front of a large bank of display screens and Maddie could see both Venice and Freeman standing in front of it, watching the monitors closely. Looking at one of the monitors herself Maddie could just about pick out writing in one corner and a set of bio-readouts on the adjacent screen and she knew immediately that this was the tactical operations centre for the Weyland-Yutani commandos, equivalent to the system installed in the marines' APCs. That this had been activated told Maddie that the company's troops were on the move and likely engaging Williams' platoon.

Getting closer to this would tell Maddie immediately how all of the Weyland-Yutani troops were deployed and what they were doing, vital information if she was to escape from the facility and rejoin Williams and his troops. The problem was that she could not see any other vent grills that had a better line of sight to the tactical operations centre than the one she was currently peering through and this was too far away for her to make out anything more than blurred shapes on any of the monitors. Maddie could see that there was another grill right above the tactical operations centre and while she would not be able to see any of the displays from there, if she was located just inside it then her proximity to Venice and Freeman could allow her to hear what they were discussing and this could also provide her with important information.

Crawling through the vents around the command centre was risky but Maddie knew that the intelligence she could gather would be worth the risk and so she resumed crawling through the vent, circling around the command centre.

"This leaves us with just a single rifle section to guard the facility, but I consider it worth the risk." Freeman said.

"Using nerve gas is risky Mister Freeman." Venice replied.

"Perhaps, but your tests have indicated that the xenomorph's physiology is sufficient different to ours that CN-twenty will have no effect on them or their eggs. On the other hand our intelligence suggests that any chemical protective clothing Captain Williams' platoon may have brought with them was lost when we destroyed their vehicles."

Maddie's eyes widened when she heard this. She had heard Venice giving Freeman the order to attack Williams and the marines but she had not known that they had already begun that attack. From what the pair had said it was clear that the attack had met with some success, leaving the marines without armour or air support but at least some of the marines themselves had survived. Freeman's choice of weapon also told Maddie where the survivors were likely to be hiding, the derelict alien ship was the only place that she could think of that Weyland-Yutani would not simply bombard with heavy weapons and according to the report Maddie had seen it also contained thousands of valuable alien eggs that the company would not want to risk damaging. The problem was that if Freeman's troops did deploy a chemical weapon as lethal as CN-20 nerve gas then all of the survivors would likely be wiped out and Maddie knew that she needed to warn whoever was left about the impending attack.

"The problem is that the gas is in canisters that are too large to deliver from a distance. I propose having our technical section create several smaller canisters that we can load into RPG rounds and we'll use these to secure several access points of the ship. Then once we're inside we can release the rest of the gas from the standard canisters and flood the ship.

"Filling an enclosed space with nerve gas? How long will that take to disperse?" Venice asked.

"Given what we know about the interior of the ship I'd say that it would remain a hot zone for at least twenty days. Parts of it likely much longer, but after we've gassed the marines my men will evacuate and we can go back to just sending in androids when your lab boys want more eggs."

Venice nodded.

"Speak to the technical section." she said, "Tell them that producing suitable warheads for the RPGs takes absolute priority over everything else. Then as soon as you have them I want Captain Williams and his band of merry men wiped out."

Maddie decided that she had heard enough. She knew that Williams was alive, where he and his men were located and how the Weyland-Yutani forces intended to attack them. Now though she needed to find a way of at least communicating what she knew to the marines and ideally of joining up with them. Maddie had had plenty of opportunity to consider how she was going to get out of the research facility and now she made her way towards the new structure that was under construction, reasoning that there would have to be a means to access this and given the incomplete state of the structure it should also be easy to get outside entirely. Starting to crawl along the vent once again, she made her way towards the structure currently under construction. This was located very close to the existing test pens and Maddie took the opportunity to see if there had been any changes since she and Williams had inspected them earlier.

Looking from the vent when she reached the hallway outside the test pens Maddie saw that a pair of commandos armed with pulse rifles still stood outside the armoured glass doors that enabled them to see along the entire length of the hallway connecting individual pens together, just as they had done when Maddie had last been here. She considered this a plus point, it meant that Venice considered this part of the facility to be secure or she would have increased security on its primary asset; the aliens themselves. Knowing that the new larger test pen was close by now, Maddie continued on her way. She had not personally seen this part of the facility and was relying on her ability to calculate a route based on her observation from the air.

After a couple of wrong turns that required her to double back, Maddie made it to what was obviously the part of the facility that would connect to the new structure once it was finished. Even from inside the vent this was recognisable by the way that the vent had been opened up ready to be connected to the new structure even though the ducting was not yet in place and this enabled Maddie to simply jump down into the corridor where a large double door had already been installed to provide a means of getting into and out of the new structure. There was also a bracket mounted in the ceiling opposite the doors that was obviously meant for a security camera. However, this had yet to be installed and Maddie was confident that she was not being observed here. The missing camera was not the only evidence of incomplete work, however and although the door had been installed Maddie saw that it was obviously not yet functional. The control panel hung open with wires hanging loose inside while a pair of access panels in the wall either side of the door were also open and revealed empty spaces where the motors for the doors would be located once the work was complete.

Fortunately the missing control and motor systems meant that the door would not be physically locked, relying on their on weight to remain closed instead and Maddie rushed right up to where the two parts of the door joined in the middle where she attempted to squeeze her fingers into the join so she could pry the doors open. Unfortunately even for the strength of an android, the doors were too heavy and the join too narrow for Maddie to be able to get a grip. Giving up on trying to open the doors with her bare hands, Maddie backed

away and looked around in search of something she could use to pry them apart.

A damage control station a short distance down the corridor caught Maddie's attention and she darted towards it, alert for anyone approaching as she ventured further from the relative safety of the ventilation duct. The damage control station was typical for a facility such as this. The equipment include emergency medical supplies, fire extinguishers for various types of fires, a hose reel and valves to supply it with either water or pressurised carbon dioxide, anti-smoke hoods and chemical lights. However, what really interested Maddie was the large axe clipped to the back of the locker. Such a tool was useless for smashing down heavy doors or through bulkheads but against flimsy sheet metal or plastic doors it could be used to force an entry in an emergency. Right now though Maddie was more interested in the sharpness of the blade for inserting into the crack between doors so that they could be forced apart and she removed the heavy axe from its mounting and returned to the doors.

As she had hoped, Maddie was able to force the edge of the axe blade into the crack between the two parts of the door and she pushed as hard as she could to force it in deeper. This produced a grinding sound as the axe and doors rubbed against one another but Maddie continued, rocking the axe back and forth as she attempted to lever the doors far enough apart to allow her to squeeze through.

Maddie frowned as her best efforts appeared insufficient to move the doors more than a couple of millimetres but then she leant on the axe and felt it shift as the head was pushed deeper between the doors and she smiled as she saw that this had pushed the doors just far enough apart that she thought she might be able to squeeze her fingers into the gap that she was now able to peer through. Sure enough Maddie's fingers just about fit into the gap between the doors and she pulled as hard as she could, attempting to drag just one of the doors back far enough that she could squeeze her entire body through. Had she been human Maddie would have quickly exhausted herself but she continued to try until she heard an all too familiar sound from outside.

The hiss of an alien.

Maddie leapt back from the door that now had an opening of about two inches and through the gap saw an adult alien apparently peering back at her. Maddie gasped as the alien reached into the narrow gap between the doors with both its hands and began to push them apart with apparent ease while Maddie looked on in horror from across the corridor.

The moment that the gap was wide enough for it to fit through, the alien leapt between the doors and landed right in front of Maddie who froze and stared at the front of its eyeless head. Hissing again, the alien leant in closer to Maddie and extended its smaller set of jaws towards her face. These snapped open and shut just centimetres from Maddie. Able to sense that Maddie was not human and that she posed no threat, the alien suddenly turned away from her and darted along the corridor before it leapt up into the vent Maddie herself had not long vacated.

Maddie considered her duty to warn the Weyland-Yutani staff that there was an alien loose in the facility but then remembered her primary duty to warn Williams of the impending gas attack instead.

"Sorry Miss Venice." she said to herself, "But you brought this on yourself." and then she squeezed herself through the gap in the door created by the alien and ran into the incomplete structure beyond.

12.

"Still no signs of activity out there captain." Preston said when Williams came to check on him and Manchester. The two machine gunners had been using the infra red targeting systems of their weapons to monitor the terrain between the derelict alien ship and the Weyland-Yutani research post.

"Those company types have no imagination." Manchester added, "Maybe they've sent back to Earth for instructions from head office."

"I doubt it marine." Williams responded, "Venice seemed quite intelligent and resourceful when I met her. I don't think that the lack of obvious activity is down to inaction. I think it's because she's making sure everything is in place before her men act. Keep watching and let me know the moment you spot any activity." "You might need more than those infra-red targeting scanners." Lawrence said as he and his men reappeared in the passageway behind the marines. Williams smiled when he heard the sound of the gunnery sergeant's voice but his face fell when he turned and saw Ellis being carried back unconscious.

"What happened?" he asked.

"We're not alone in here." Lawrence answered.

"Weyland-Yutani?" Williams said.

"No. It seems that not all of the aliens on this planet are inside the company's private little zoo." Lawrence told him.

"Get him over here." Fenton said when he saw the injure Ellis and the marines carrying the sergeant deposited him where the corpsman told them.

"Do you know roughly how many we're dealing with?" Williams said to Lawrence.

"Three now, but that's a guess." he replied, "Ellis was attacked by one and was injured in a fall. We dealt with that one easily enough though but then we found where they were nesting. There weren't any aliens there but-

"But they were cocooning people." O'Hern interrupted, "We found people with creatures stuck to their faces and their chests burst wide open."

"We found six people encased as part of the nest and what looked like the remains of two others that had been impregnated with the first ones." Lawrence explained.

"Remains?" Williams commented.

"Yeah, it looks like on this occasion the aliens decided to eat the people they came out of. Or at least that's how it looked. Of the six cocooned two had already had aliens hatch from them and two had facehuggers attached to them." Lawrence said.

"Is it safe to go back to this nest and examine it?" Williams said but Lawrence shook his head.

"There's no nest left." he replied, "While we were there an alien burst right out of a man's chest."

"That's when the gunny used a grenade to take out the lot in one go." Perez added, "Nailed the alien, all of the captives and must have been a couple of hundred of those eggs."

"All of the captives had been infected captain." Lawrence said, "There was nothing we could have done for them."

"Very well sergeant, I trust you did what was best." Williams said. Then he turned to Teller, "Teller I want you and Perez to watch our rear. Use your motion tracker to let us know if any more of the aliens are in here with us."

"Yes captain." Teller replied and he and Perez moved to the rear of the platoon, positioning themselves at a nearby junction where they could cover as much of the ship as possible with Teller's motion tracker.

Williams then looked out through the hole in the side of the ship towards the research facility again.

"I just hope Maddie's okay." he said. Then after a moment's pause he glanced at Lawrence and added, "Don't tell her I said that though."

Getting out of the partially constructed building was simple enough, Maddie was simply able to walk up to an incomplete exterior wall and climb through a large hole that she guessed was intended to be the location of a window and climb through to the surface of LV-426. Once outside though Maddie rapidly discovered that knowing that the surviving marines were holed up inside the derelict alien starship and actually getting to them were two entirely different things. Freeman had deployed pairs of his men equipped with motion trackers in a line between the ship and research facility. These were intended to provide warning if the marines attempted to launch a counter attack against Weyland-Yutani but they were also deployed in such a way that Maddie found herself unable to reach the alien ship.

"That alien got through them, so I must be able to as well." she said to herself, "Think Maddie, think. You've got a Carbon-Sixty processor in your brain that makes you smarter than these guys."

It occurred to Maddie that if she could locate the end of the line then perhaps she could simply walk around

the company's commandos and get to the ship that way but as she walked along it she found that the line curved at each end so that it came close enough to the structures of the research facility that Maddie was not confident that she could sneak through the gap that had been left. Instead she decided that she would have to use the available terrain to her advantage and just try to keep out of the commandos' lines of fire. Even if they detected her passing between them, as long as she could stop them shooting at her then she could still make it to the marines inside the alien starship. Of course if the commandos chose to use an indirect fire weapon against her then she would probably be destroyed but she was just going to have to chance that they would not opt to deploy such a weapon for a single target.

Picking an area of ground notable by the number of rock formations that stuck up out of the ground to create strange twisted shapes, Maddie crept towards the line of Weyland-Yutani troops. Thankfully the positions held by the commandos were intended to be hidden from view from the direction of the alien starship, not the direction of the research facility that Maddie was approaching from and she could make out their precise locations easily as she headed for a point approximately midway between two adjacent pairs of soldiers.

Maddie paused as soon as she reached a point that was directly between the soldiers, aware that from now on she would be within the area of ground that they would be monitoring with their motion trackers.

Fortunately one of the spires of rock was located close by and Maddie darted towards that before coming to another halt so she could check on whether there had been any reaction from the nearby commandos.

Seeing nothing, she broke into another quick sprint and headed for another of the strangely shaped rock formations before grinding to a halt beside it.

This time one of the Weyland-Yutani commandos picked up the movement with his scanner and a pair of soldiers turned in Maddie's direction. Peering out from behind the rocks Maddie now found that she did not have such a good view of the men as she had done while behind them and, hoping that the rocks would adequately conceal her from their line of sight she picked another nearby rocky outcrop as her destination and started to run.

"Halt!" a voice called out and then a moment later a shot rang out that was accompanied by the sound of a small explosion as a round from a pulse rifle struck a nearby rock and cracked it when the explosive it contained went off.

Knowing that she had been seen Maddie chose to continue, counting on her superior speed and reflexes to get her to the relative safety of the next rock formation. Two more rounds struck the ground just behind her before she made it to the rocks and took cover but then another bullet struck the rocks just above her head from the other side and she realised that the second pair of soldiers she had passed between were also firing at her. Fortunately their firing angle was poor and Maddie used the impact points of the pulse rifle bullets to select her next destination.

"I've got gunfire." Manchester called out and Williams, Lawrence and Sergeant Sellers all came rushing to see what was going on outside the ship.

"I see it." Lawrence said, raising a pair of binoculars and looking towards the source of the gunfire, "That's just pulse rifle fire though, nothing heavy."

"I don't see their target." Sellers added as he too looked through binoculars.

"Let me see." Williams said, lacking binoculars of his own and Sellers passed him his, "Range about six hundred metres. Looks like they're firing at those rocks on the other side of the landfill." he added and then he saw a familiar figure suddenly emerge from behind the rocks and run towards the starship, "It's Maddie!" he exclaimed.

"Looks like she's attracting a lot of attention down there. I see four more men moving into position to cut her off." Lawrence added.

"Manchester. Preston. Lay down suppressing fire. Keep those reinforcements away from Maddie." Williams ordered and Manchester grinned.

"Finally." he said, "Time to rock."

The two gunners opened fire together, sending rapid bursts of explosive tipped rounds towards the Weyland-Yutani troops that had emerged from their hiding places to try and prevent Maddie from reaching the relative safety of the starship. Most of their shots tore into the ground ahead of the commandos but one round hit the lead trooper and he fell dead instantly, a fist sized hole blown in his armoured chest plate. The other commandos moving to try and cut Maddie off immediately sought whatever cover they could find and some returned fire, but from this extreme range their weapons were useless and none of their shots came close to the hole the marines were firing from.

Meanwhile Williams and Lawrence watched as Maddie darted from her hiding place and made it to the next rock formation while pulse rifle round continued to whiz past her.

"She'll never make it on her own." Williams said and he looked around, "I want three men to come with me. O'Hern, Barns. Devon."

"I'm with you too." Lawrence added.

"No, I need you to stay here and take command if anything happens to me gunnery sergeant." Williams said.

"Which is more likely if I'm not out there to watch your back." Lawrence pointed out.

"Okay then. Sellers, you have command until we get back. If we don't then I want you to find a way to contact the Almayer and relay a message back to any US or allied installation. Tell them what's happened here and request reinforcements."

"Yes captain." Sellers replied as the other marines Williams had ordered to accompany him were moving towards the hole.

"Keep covering us." Williams told the two smart gunners and as he and his team ran from the alien ship there was more gunfire from Manchester and Preston directed at the Weyland-Yutani commandos.

Maddie's acute hearing could tell the difference not only between pulse rifle and smart gun fire but also identified the direction it was moving in from the way the sound varied and it was obvious to her that the marines in the alien ship were using their machine guns to keep the Weyland-Yutani soldiers pinned down. Not wanting to waste the opportunity she was being given Maddie made a break for the alien ship, running as fast as she could towards it. She was coming towards the end of the rocky ground now, getting towards the area where the Weyland-Yutani personnel disposed of the waste from their activities and Maddie knew that although the heaps of trash would obscure her position just as well as rocks would, they would be far less resistant to gunfire.

Right on cue a burst of fire from a pulse rifle struck a stack of containers that had once held cooking oil but now mainly held rainwater than had collected in them along with the dregs of the oil and Maddie was sprayed by this liquid as the containers burst open. More rounds tore into the ground near Maddie and she dived for cover before they could hit her instead. The sound of the shots being fired towards her was changing now, becoming louder and Maddie knew that this meant the Weyland-Yutani commandos were getting closer to her. If she was not able to reach the alien ship soon then she would likely find herself cut off.

"She's there!" a voice called out from not far away and Maddie glanced around just in time to see a team of four Weyland-Yutani troops deploy themselves to fire on her, their training making them take cover even though they would probably have known that she was unarmed and unable to use a weapon against them in any case.

Maddie rolled and then sprinted the short distance to a pile of metal equipment containers. These were empty now but they had been solidly built to protect their contents and Maddie hoped that they would provide her with at least some protection while she tried to find another escape route that would keep her clear of the commandos. The containers were not entirely proof against the armour piercing rounds fired by pulse rifles, however and Maddie was forced to lie flat on the ground to avoid being hit by splinters of metal from them as they were struck repeatedly by explosive tipped bullets. Then a stray round caught a nearby drum that was filled with a foul-smelling sludge and it exploded, covering Maddie in the sludge and causing her to squeal.

"She's just up ahead of you now captain. Looks like she's pinned down." Preston transmitted.

"Thank you private. Can you give us more covering fire?" Williams responded.

"Sorry captain. Our angle's not good from here. Besides there are at least half a dozen more company men about sixty metres from your position. If we switch to covering Maddie then they'll be on top of you in about a minute."

"Understood." Williams said and then as he continued to run forwards Lawrence reached out and caught hold of his shoulder.

"Down!" he exclaimed and the marines took cover just as a burst of pulse rifle fire rang out.

As Barns threw herself to the ground she was already aiming her pulse rifles towards their attacker and she fired three rapid shots, one after another at him. The third round hit the commando and he threw his arms up into the air as he fell backwards. However, although that particular commando had been dealt with there were still others close by and they too began to fire in the marines' direction, pinning them down.

"Maddie!" Williams shouted out.

"I'm here!" she yelled back at him, "I can't move or I'll get shot but you need to know that Venice is-"

"Never mind that now. Where are the soldiers firing at you?" Williams interrupted.

"About twenty metres from me. Directly opposite you."

Williams then reached out his hand towards O'Hern.

"Corporal give me a grenade." he said and O'Hern nodded.

"You are not planning what I think you are." Lawrence said, watching Williams insert the grenade into the launcher mounted beneath his pulse rifle.

"This would work better with two of us." Williams replied and Lawrence sighed.

"Okay, let's do this then." he said and together the two men racked the slides on their grenade launchers, chambering the explosive rounds into the weapons.

Angling their rifles upwards, Williams and Lawrence pointed their weapons towards the soldiers firing on Maddie and looked at one another.

"Okay counting down from three." Williams said, "Three. Two. One. Fire in the hole!"

The two marines fired simultaneously and their grenades flew into the air, travelling in arc that took them right over Maddie until they descended to land among the four commandos shooting at her.

The loose nature of the ground and the debris covering it meant that the grenades both buried themselves beneath the visible surface before exploding and although the blast was somewhat dampened by this the shrapnel from the grenades was joined by more debris from around the grenades. The combined effect of the two grenades blasted the three commandos off their feet, killing two of them instantly.

"Go!" Lawrence snapped and he and the other three enlisted men leapt up and charged around the pile of waste they had been using for cover towards the remaining commando while Williams headed for where Maddie lay in the pool of sludge.

The surviving commando had lost his pulse rifle in the explosion but when he saw the marines charging towards him he reached to where he had grenades of his own in his webbing.

"Don't do it!" O'Hern shouted but the commando flicked the cover from the grenade's arming button and before he could press it O'Hern fired his weapon, putting three holes in the man's chest plate before he slumped backwards on the ground, the grenade rolling from his hand.

"Secure that grenade." Lawrence ordered and then he looked around, "Captain, is Maddie okay?"

"Are you?" Williams asked as he squatted in front of Maddie and she looked up and smiled at him.

"I knew you'd come!" she exclaiming, lunging forwards and wrapping her arms around him and Williams wretched at the smell of the sludge she was rubbing off on him, "I'll take that as a 'yes'." he gasped.

"Captain you've got more hostiles on approach." Preston's voice said over the radio and Williams pulled Maddie away from him as they both got back to their feet.

"Understood. We're on our way back now." Williams replied before turning to the other marines, "Okay marines it's time to fall back." he told them.

Since they had reached full size the amount of food consumed by the aliens had dropped to almost nothing, the researchers theorising that they needed only a minimal amount to be able to produce the resin they were all using to cover the walls of their pens. Therefore, in order to keep them as docile as possible the feeding continued although at a much reduced rate. The task of feeding the aliens fell to junior human members of the research team rather than androids and they were fed one at a time, watched not only through the hatch that the food was deposited in but also through the armoured glass at the front of their pens. However, on this occasion the research team were not only observing, they were being observed as well.

The alien that had entered the facility's ventilation system was drawn towards the nearby test pens by both the smell of its kin as well as that of fresh meat. The access grill to the ventilation duct that the alien looked through was positioned close to the floor of the upper level where the food was delivered to the aliens below. Looking through this the alien saw a pair of researchers removed a container of food from a storage unit before one of them carried it to one of the hatches set into the floor while the other went to a nearby control panel that was protected by a transparent plastic cover. Lifting this revealed a single red button that the researcher pressed to open the hatch and as soon as this happened the other man tipped the food through. Both researchers then waited, one watching through the hatch while the second remained beside the control panel ready to close the hatch in a hurry if necessary.

The moment the hatch was opened the alien in the vent smelt the alien being held in the pen below and it heard the hiss let out by the captive alien as it disengaged itself from its nest and made its way to the food, ignoring the researchers watching through the hatch and glass wall. Only when the alien returned to the resin covered wall was the hatch closed again and the researchers moved onto the next pen, repeating the procedure exactly.

The alien watched this happen several times, seeing the two researchers in the upper level get closer to its position in the vent each time until they were almost right outside. Once again the alien watched the two men bring food from the storage room and take up their positions beside a hatch and control panel and the alien braced itself. Then at the moment that the hatch was opened the alien burst from the vent, smashing its way through the grill effortlessly. Before either of the startled researchers could even cry out the alien lashed out with its tail to knock the one by the hatch down through the opening at the same time as it leapt onto the man by the controls and began to savage him, preventing him from closing the hatch.

The man who had fallen did not fall all the way to the floor below though, instead he was able to grab hold of the edge of the hatchway and clung on by his fingers, dangling down into the holding pen below.

"Good God!" one of the horrified researchers standing in the hallway outside the pen exclaimed when he saw this.

"Guards!" the other yelled, "Get in here now!" but it was already too late.

The alien inside the pen uncurled itself from the wall and lunged at the researcher dangling through the hatchway just as the man was starting to lift himself back up through it. However, when the alien caught hold of him he slipped back down, ending up clinging onto the edge of the hatchway by his fingers again. The alien did not just grab hold of the helpless dangling man though, it used him as a stepping stone to be able to grab hold of the edge of the hatchway itself and it quickly pulled itself up through it. Then as its final act as

part of its escape it thrust the tip of its tail through the researcher below, impaling him through his stomach before dragging the screaming man up through the hatch just as the two armed guards came rushing up to the pen.

Above the pen the newly escaped alien looked at the more slender creature that had freed it and one after another they let out a hiss. Then the alien that had watched the actions of the researchers carefully from the vent bounded to the adjacent control panel, presenting its face to the plastic cover over the button that opened the hatch. All of a sudden the alien's mouth dropped wide open and the set of inner jaws shot out with sufficient force to smash through the plastic cover and press the button beneath it.

As soon as the button was pressed, the nearby hatch slid open and the other alien bounded towards it, hissing. The sound attracted the attention of the alien in the pen below, one of the ones that had just been fed and it detached itself from the wall once more. The alien moved across its pen and looked up to see the other alien looking back down at it.

"Over here!" one of the researchers in the hallway called out, pointing at the pen where the alien was now active again just as the alien above lowered its tail through the hatchway so that the one in the pen below could use it to climb free.

"No!" the other researcher yelled.

"Control we have a serious situation down here." one of the guards transmitted.

"Miss Venice the aliens are breaking out!" the technician monitoring the camera feeds from the alien pens called out and Venice turned to see what was going on.

"What do you mean they're breaking out?" she demanded, "Those pens are escape proof."

"Well tell that to the aliens." the technician responded, in his panic momentarily forgetting that he was talking to a company executive.

"He's right. Look." Freeman added, pointing to the feeds from the guards' helmet cameras that he and Venice had been ignoring while they watched and co-ordinated the fighting going on outside, "We need to do something to stop all of those things getting out."

"Those specimens are worth millions." Venice said.

"They're worth nothing on the loose." Freeman pointed out, "My men need to deal with them as quickly as possible."

"Okay then." Venice said, nodding, "Destroy the test samples."

"Freeman to pen security detail. Terminate all samples. I say again, terminate all samples."

13.

The order to kill the captive aliens came just as a third creature was climbing out of its pen. Meanwhile the commandos and researchers split into pairs, each consisting of a commando and a researcher so that they could take two pens at a time as they hurried to prevent any more aliens from escaping. Each pair worked the same way, the researcher opening the pen door while the commando stood ready with his pulse rifle and fired at the alien inside the pen as soon as the door was opened.

Each pair despatched their first alien with ease but the creatures in the other pens, hearing the gunfire responded by moving towards the glass walls at the front of their pens. One of the researchers still acted to open the next pen he and his paired commando reached but the alien inside was already charging towards the doorway and it leapt towards the opening as soon as it was there. The commando outside still fired his pulse rifle but he had too little time to aim the weapon properly and the alien was already in mid leap when he fired.

Part of the burst hit the alien and it let out a brief screech before slamming into the commando and it was at this point that the alien's blood splashed across both the commando and the nearby researcher. Both men screamed in agony as the blood began to burn their flesh and the researcher raised his hands instinctively to try and protect his face that was already being attacked by the acid but the alien was not done with them yet. Only lightly injured by the pulse rifle fire the enraged alien ripped open the commando's armour before biting into his throat at the same time as it lashed out with its tail, striking the researcher in his neck with enough force to break it.

Seeing what was happening the other commando turned and opened fire on the alien, finishing it off with a burst of fire from his pulse rifle. However, the researcher he was paired with had just opened the pen door in front of them and it was not until the alien inside landed right inside the door that the commando turned back to face it. Holding up his pulse rifle, he aimed it under the alien's jaw but the creature reached out and grabbed the weapon by its barrel before pushing it aside. Then it lowered its head and used its smaller jaws to punch a hole right through the centre of the commando's forehead.

Panicking, the researcher turned and ran towards the exit from the hallway but the alien gave chase. Much faster than the human, the alien charged into the man from behind and knocked him to the ground before it began to slash at his back with its claws.

Although horrified at the sight of what was happening Venice could not take her eyes off the monitors showing the events transpiring in the research section as the aliens killed the researchers and guards before setting about opening more of the pens to release the others. The reports she had seen had suggested that the creatures may have the most basic of tool using skills but she had not expected them to be able to operate even the simple push button controls to the feeding hatches or pen doors.

"Freeman get more men to the research section now!" she yelled, "I want a full platoon deployed to-"

"We don't have a full platoon." Freeman interrupted, "You ordered me to send most of the men to deal with the marines. We only kept eight men here to provide security and two of them are dead now."

At that moment Oliver came rushing into the command centre, obviously out of breath.

"Venice!" he yelled, "The aliens, they're loose!"

"I know that." Venice responded.

"Well what are you going to do about it? Shouldn't you be sending the guards to stop them?" Oliver asked.

"Remember your place Mister Oliver." Venice said sternly, "It's a long walk back to Earth if I decide to terminate your contract."

"But what-" Oliver began as Venice ran towards another of the control stations, leaning over the back of the operators chair.

"Seal all emergency doors." she ordered, ignoring Oliver, "The vents as well. I want full fire control protocols in effect immediately. Alert all staff to return to their quarters and stay there while our security troops deal with this threat."

"Fire doors? Ventilation barriers? That's not going to hold them out. We need armed guards in the research section now." Oliver exclaimed.

"I told you to remember your place Mister Oliver!" Venice snapped, "Now if you can't calm down and be quiet then you may as well leave."

Fine, I'll keep my mouth shut." Oliver muttered as he backed towards the wall.

All around the facility alarms sounded as doors used to divide different sections from each other closed automatically.

"All personnel are to report to their quarters until further notice." the technician operating the emergency systems announced over the public address system, "Research seals have been breached. Report all

sightings to security immediately.”

Alternating moving with laying down covering fire the other marines protected Williams and Maddie as they fell back towards the derelict alien starship. Behind them the Weyland-Yutani commandos gave chase, firing on the fleeing marines as well.

“Look out!” Maddie shouted, diving onto Williams and knocking him to the ground when she saw another team of company troops appear unexpectedly along the route they were taking and several pulse rifle rounds flew through the air where he had been moments earlier.

Williams rolled over, pushing Maddie beneath him and pointed his own pulse rifle back at the commandos before firing a rapid burst of his own. The rounds hit nothing but they did force the Weyland-Yutani troops to take cover themselves, still blocking the marines' withdrawal.

“Preston. Manchester. Can you give us covering fire?” Williams signalled.

“Negative captain.” Manchester's voice responded, “You're in dead ground there.”

There was more fire from behind Williams that went clear over his head and he looked around to see Lawrence and O'Hern approaching.

“We can't stay here captain.” Lawrence said as he reached down to help Williams back to his feet.

“Hey!” Maddie called out, “I was enjoying that.”

“Later.” Williams said and Maddie smiled as she got to her feet.

“Okay, but only if you promise.” she said before another volley of pulse rifle fire forced the marines back behind a large empty pressure cylinder that stood nearby.

“Did you see how many there were sir?” O'Hern asked and Williams nodded.

“Four.” he said, “Rifles only I think.”

“Well they know we're here. We need to find somewhere safer before they decide to start using grenades instead.” Lawrence said.

“Gunnery sergeant, where was Bravo Team's APC when it got hit?” Williams asked and Lawrence smiled.

“About two hundred metres that way.” he said, pointing, “I think we can make it with enough covering fire.”

“Okay then we all go at once and we fire everything we've got.” Williams told the other marines, “Full auto. I don't care if we hit anything, I just want to keep those corporate guys' heads down.”

“On three.” Lawrence said, “One. Two. Three!”

The marines suddenly burst from behind the cylinder, firing their pulse rifles continuously towards the commandos. The hail of explosive tipped bullets produced a cloud of shrapnel as the rounds impacted on the ground all around the Weyland-Yutani troops but none of them was hit. Instead they were forced to keep out of the line of fire, preventing them from shooting at the running marines while they were briefly out in the open and exposed.

Williams' rifle suddenly ceased firing and he glanced down to see that the ammunition counter had reached zero without him realising it. Then he looked up ahead and saw the familiar shape of an M577 wheeled armoured personnel carrier. This particular example was obviously wrecked, the entire front section having been blown wide open as far back as the forward set of wheels by the HIMAT round.

“Come on! We're nearly there.” he shouted, grabbing Maddie by the hand and pulling her along with him, despite the android easily being able to keep up with or even outrun the marines if necessary.

Williams and Maddie reached the wreck of the APC ahead of the other marines and rather than run around the side and try to open the main access hatch they just climbed in through the gaping hole in the front of the vehicle, Williams glancing briefly and wincing when he saw the scorched remains of Brown still in the driver's seat. Both were so badly burned that it was difficult to tell where one ended and the other began.

“Come on,” Williams said to Maddie, “we'll be safer in the rear.”

Barns was the next to reach the APC and she also climbed in through the front of the vehicle.

“I'm down to my last mag.” she said, ejecting the spent magazine from her pulse rifle and then taking a replacement from a belt pouch, causing the weapon's ammo counter display to reset to ninety-five.

“Some of this gear may have survived.” Williams replied, looking around at the equipment containers packed into the APC's storage racks. These were armoured specifically to survive the rigours of combat and he reached for one labelled 'MAGAZINES, 10x24mm CASELESS, HEAP'. The simple fact that this container was still intact told him that the destruction of the APC had not caused any of the ammunition to cook off, since even a single round detonating inside would have triggered a chain reaction that would have blown the whole thing apart. Opening the container up he smiled as he found the contents all still present and he and Barns began to help themselves to the ammunition.

“Did everyone make it?” Lawrence asked when he climbed through the front of the APC with O'Hern and Devon.

“Out of ammo but safe and sound.” Williams said, “Fortunately it looks like a lot of the gear stowed in the back survived the explosion. Help yourselves to whatever you can find and carry.”

“We may be safe for now but Venice is planning on using gas against us.” Maddie said, “I overheard her and Freeman planning to use RPGs to deliver an opening salvo. Then once they've got a foothold in that alien

ship they'll flood the rest from larger cylinders."

Lawrence looked around at the storage containers in the rear of the APC.

"All the NBC kit was up front." he said, "It's gone."

"Same for whatever was in Alpha Team's APC probably. That burned up so I doubt anything survived."

Williams added. Then he looked at Maddie, "Did they say when they'd be launching this attack?" he asked.

"They don't have suitable warheads yet so they need to make them." she answered.

"That'll take time." Lawrence said.

"And I don't think they have it." Maddie added, "There's an alien loose in their facility."

"What? Did one escape from their holding pens?" Williams said and Maddie shook her head.

"Not quite." she said, "In fact I may have helped it get inside when I-"

"That accounts for another one then." Lawrence said without waiting for Maddie to finish her explanation.

"Another one? You mean there are more of those things out here?" Maddie said, looking back and forth between Williams and Lawrence.

"Two more by our calculation." Lawrence said.

"Lawrence took a patrol deep into the alien ship." Williams explained.

"And we found the hold where all the eggs are. Thousands of them all lined up in neat little groups. Then we found where some of the aliens were making a nest and a bunch of men being used as hosts for more of them. Four had already hatched out and four were still growing inside their hosts. Don't worry about them though, we made sure that none of them will be a problem."

"Captain Williams do you read me?" Preston's voice asked over the radio and Williams placed a hand against the side of his head.

"Reading you private." he responded.

"That's a relief captain. When we could see you and the company troops started to withdraw we thought that-"

"Wait." Williams interrupted, "What do you mean the company troops are withdrawing."

"They were pretty keen on following us when we last saw them." Lawrence commented.

"I can't explain it sir but we've been seeing movement all along their line but it's back towards their facility rather than towards us." Preston told him.

"The alien." Maddie said, "They must have discovered it and they're pulling their men back to deal with it."

"Their entire force for just one alien?" Devon said, overhearing this on his own helmet radio, "Are they really that dangerous?"

"No. But if that one was able to release the others somehow." Lawrence said before trailing off.

"Then Venice and her people would be overrun." Williams added.

"So let's let the aliens do the work for us." Devon commented.

"No, if we're going to find out what Weyland-Yutani has been up to here then we need living witnesses. I want to take Venice back to Earth to answer questions." Williams said. Then he reached for his radio again,

"Sellers do you read me?" he asked.

"Loud and clear captain." Sellers replied.

"What's the state on our wounded?"

"Stable captain."

"Good. I want Fenton to stay put and keep an eye on them. Everyone else is to join us at Bravo Team's APC. It looks like quite a lot of the gear stashed inside survived so we'll load up with everything we can carry before we move on the facility. Venice and her people aren't going to know what hit them."

The emergency doors in the research facility were there to prevent the spread of fire rather than act as a security feature and this meant that they could be overridden locally, enabling people to escape burning sections rather than being trapped in them. Doors opened in this way would remain open only for a few seconds before they automatically closed again. This allowed the unit of four commandos that had been guarding the main entrance to the facility to make their way rapidly to the research section. They encountered a handful of other Weyland-Yutani personnel fleeing in the other direction but they ignored these as they hurried to make certain that the aliens were contained.

When they reached the door to the hallway connecting the holding pens the commandos heard the sound of banging from the other side as the aliens tried to batter the door down from the inside. Fortunately this door had been reinforced and rather than smashing their way through it the aliens could manage was to dent it.

"Command, we're in position." the squad leader radioed to the command centre as he and his men took up positions from where they could fire their weapons towards the doors.

"Good. Stay put and don't let any of them out." Freeman responded, "Reinforcements will be there in ten minutes."

The pounding on the door suddenly ceased and one of the commandos glanced at their leader.

"Have they given up?" he said.

"I doubt it. Keep your eyes-" the squad leader began before there was the sound of grinding metal.

"What's happening?" another of the commandos said before they all noticed the way that the doors had bent under the repeated impacts meant that they did not quite meet in the middle any more and this had created a gap that some of the aliens had managed to force their fingers into and were now acting to drag the doors apart.

"They're coming through!" one of the commandos yelled and he fired a short burst from his pulse rifle towards the hole in the door. The shots were well aimed and from the other side of the door their came a shrill screech of pain as one of the aliens was killed. The grinding sound now ceased as the others backed away from the narrow gap in the door but it was replaced by something different, a fizzing sound as the highly acidic alien blood that had sprayed across the far side of the door began to eat its way through the metal it was made of.

The hole grew steadily bigger before an alien burst through it. The creature's more slender frame indicated that it was the one hatched from one of the Weyland-Yutani employees rather than one of the chimpanzees brought to LV-426 especially for the purpose of breeding the aliens. This smaller size did not make the alien much harder to hit as it bounded towards the waiting Weyland-Yutani troops though and a volley of pulse rifle fire ripped it apart before it could reach any of the commandos. However, the hole continued to expand and just moments after the first alien leapt through it the slightly larger creatures hatched from the chimpanzees were able to follow. Focused on the first alien to appear, the commandos were unable to shift their aim fast enough to deal with the multiple creatures that followed until it was too late. The first commando that fired on one of the larger aliens did so right as the creature leapt at him and his rounds punched holes in the carapace covering its chest before exploding inside the alien and tearing it apart from within. This hurled fragments of tissue and bone around the corridor and sprayed blood over a wide area. Everywhere that this blood touched started to fizz and the commandos all cried out in pain as the corrosive liquid burned their flesh. No longer able to defend themselves, the commandos were easy prey as the rest of the aliens came swarming out of the research hallway.

"How long until the rest of your men get back here?" Venice asked, looking at Freeman after the last of the commandos' helmet camera feeds was cut off when the acidic blood destroyed them.

"Less than ten minutes." the commando replied.

"Ten minutes?" Oliver exclaimed, "Those things could be here in five!"

"I warned you Mister Oliver. Get out of my command centre." Venice said sternly, glaring at him.

"He's right." Freeman said and he drew his sidearm and checked that it had a round in the chamber, "Right now me and the two guards over there are all that we have left to protect this facility. Even when the rest of my men get here we may not be able to cover everywhere."

"Then what do you suggest Mister Freeman?" Venice asked.

"We not have the men but we've got the guns. I made sure we had plenty of spare weapons. I suggest that we get every last man and woman here to the armoury and issue them with a weapon. It'll be pistols and shotguns mostly, but there are a SMGs and light carbines in stock. You and Oliver can start by taking the sidearms from the guards. Same goes with mine, we don't need them and our pulse rifles."

"I don't like guns." Venice said, waving her hand.

"Well I do at times like this." Oliver said as he strode towards the guards standing by the exit and held out his hand.

"Give him your weapon." Freeman ordered and the commando obeyed, drawing his pistol before handing it over to Oliver. Copying what he had just seen Freeman do Oliver pulled back the slide to check the chamber but in doing so he accidentally pressed the magazine release and the pistol's magazine clattered to the floor.

"You really think he'll help?" Venice commented, looking at Freeman.

"He's one more I don't need to worry about guarding." Freeman answered, "Now if you're not going to carry a gun I can't force you, but I want everyone else to report to the armoury."

Venice turned towards one of the control stations and nodded at the technician there.

"Make the call." she said, nodding.

14.

"Movement." Devon said when his motion tracker showed several blips on its screen.

"Sellers what's your location?" Williams said into his radio headset while the other marines pointed their weapons towards the opening at the front of the APC, ready to defend it if necessary.

"Closing on your position now captain." Sellers responded.

"Stand down." Lawrence said and the marines lowered their weapons just as Preston appeared in front of the APC and then crouched down, aiming his weapon in the general direction of the research facility. Then the main door at the side of the wrecked vehicle was dragged open by Washington and Reagan to allow the other marines to enter it.

"Check the storage racks for anything that survived the attack." Williams said, "I want us ready to attack Venice's troops as soon as possible. It's possible that they could have nerve gas ready for deployment and I don't want to give them the opportunity."

"What about the aliens?" Maddie asked.

"If they are loose then we'll have to deal with them as well." Williams said, "Everyone beware of any small spaces that they could be hiding in."

"Like the vents." Maddie added, "Aboard the *Sulaco* just one took out several well armed marines."

"Use flame units to clear out anywhere that could be harbouring an alien." Williams told the marines, "I don't want to lose more men to these things when we've got Weyland-Yutani to worry about as well."

Leaving the last two commandos in the facility to protect the command centre Freeman hurried to the armoury, hearing the announcement from the command centre that all other personnel were to make their way there as well just as he left.

There were already two other members of the base staff present by the time Freeman reached the armoury, standing outside the locked door waiting for him.

"Good." he said when he saw them, "Now let's get you some guns." and he swiped his access card through the lock to open the heavy armoury door. This slid open and the lights inside automatically turned themselves on, illuminating the racks of personal weaponry inside. Very little of this was modern military weaponry, most of that was already being carried by Freeman and his commandos but there were still plenty of other weapons that Freeman had insisted be brought on the expedition, "Have either of you ever fired a rifle before?" he asked and one of the others nodded and raised his hand.

"My dad used to take me hunting." he said.

"Then you can take one of these." Freeman replied and he took a light automatic rifle from one of the racks. The 5.56mm rounds it fired had long been considered ineffective against body armour as well as a number of the hostile alien species encountered since mankind began colonising other worlds and the wide variety of weapons that fired it had passed into civilian and reserve use only. But they were easy to use with a minimum of instruction and as Freeman handed the rifle to the man he pointed to another shelf, There's ammo over there. Load up three magazines and take them with you."

"What about me?" the woman who had also been waiting outside the armoury, "I only fired that pistol I was made to train with before we came here the once."

"Then a pistol is what you get." Freeman replied and he retrieved a pistol identical to the one he had left with a technician in the command centre, "I take it you can load the magazines yourself?" he asked as the woman took the weapon from him and she nodded.

All of a sudden there was the sound of running feet and Freeman turned to see another man appear in the doorway, gasping for breath while clutching at his wounded shoulder.

"There's one coming!" he yelled, "It'll be here at any moment. It killed Kenny, the bastard. You have to give me a gun."

"You!" Freeman yelled at the man still loading 5.56mm rifle ammunition into magazines, "Get over here and cover this door with me." then he looked at the newly arrived man and added, "Grab whatever you want." he said.

Rushing to the armoury door Freeman and the other man looked out into the empty hallway. Some way along it they could see the emergency door that the injured man had come through was still open. There was a soft hiss and the door began to close again but just as it was about to seal itself again a clawed hand suddenly appeared between the two halves and blocked them from closing any further. As a safety precaution to prevent anyone being injured by a closing door the motors were designed to cut out if blocked and an alarm sounded when this happened.

The man beside Freeman fired his rifle immediately, aiming for the crack in the door and there was a screech from the alien on the other side. However, unlike the explosive rounds of pulse rifles the lightweight copper

jacketed bullet did little damage and the alien continued to hold the doors apart.

"No!" Freeman snapped, remembering how an alien's blood had burned through the door to the research section, "Wait for it to get this side of the door."

Enraged by the bullets that had injured but not incapacitated it, the alien used both hands to push the two halves of the door far enough apart that it was able to easily leap through the gap and once it was fully exposed Freeman fired his pulse rifle. Unlike the lightweight jacketed rounds fired by the worker's rifle the explosive ammunition of his own weapon was easily able to rip the alien apart while it was still far enough away from the two men that its blood did not splash over either of them.

Freeman then activated his radio, connecting him with the command centre.

"Venice its Freeman." he said.

"What is it Freeman? We're busy up here." Venice replied.

"I just took out an alien down here by the armoury. If they've got here already then they could be over half the base by now." Freeman told her.

"Yes Mister Freeman, I know that. We've got calls coming in from all over about them. It doesn't look like our fire doors are holding. I've called for a technical team to get up here with a welder. I'm going to have the door and every vent access welded in place so they can't use them to get inside."

"That's a good idea." Freeman said, nodding even though Venice could not see him, "I'll handle things out here."

Just then there was a loud 'crash' followed by a high pitched scream from inside the armoury and Freeman spun around to see that another of the aliens had just dropped from the vent running across the ceiling. The injured man was obviously paralysed by fear at the sudden appearance of the alien and he stood motionless with a shotgun in one hand and a box of shells in the other. On the other hand the woman rapidly recovered her composure enough to fire her pistol at the alien. Still somewhat panicked she fired one round after another, rapidly emptying her magazine without harming the creature and it leapt towards her and knocked her to the floor.

Knowing that shooting the alien not only risked drenching the woman in its deadly acidic blood but also that a stray explosive round in the armoury could be disastrous Freeman ran towards the alien, intending to try pressing his weapon up against the alien's head before pulling the trigger. This was he hoped to direct the direction of the blood spray away from the woman being mauled as well as ensuring that his shot would detonate somewhere safe. However, the alien sensed his approach and lashed out with its tail, hurling Freeman back and sending his pulse rifle skidding across the floor.

Landing on the floor beside the door Freeman heard the sharp 'crack' of gunfire from close by as the man armed with the man armed with the light rifle opened fire at the alien. Looking up Freeman saw that the woman was now dead and the alien was rising up to its full height, towering over the people in the room. Then he looked for his pulse rifle and saw that it had ended up by the feet of the injured man.

"Give me my gun." he called out, pulling himself back to his feet but when the injured man looked down and saw the pulse rifle at his feet he dropped the unloaded shotgun he held and instead scooped up the more advanced military rifle. Then he pointed the weapon towards the alien and took aim.

"No!" Freeman yelled but it was too late and the man pulled the pulse rifle's trigger, holding it down and spraying bullets at the alien.

Two of the rounds did hit the creature and when one detonated inside its neck it was promptly decapitated but, unable to control the unfamiliar weapon, the injured man fired far more rounds into the ammunition stored on the shelves behind the alien. The first round that detonated ignited the propellant from a box of shotgun rounds and there was a bright flash as this burned up. The flames then set fire to several of the surrounding boxes of various types of ammunition and the fire quickly began to spread.

"Move!" Freeman yelled but it was already too late as the fire suddenly reached a critical point and the entire ammunition storage area erupted in ball of flame that filled the entire armoury.

"Crap!" Manchester exclaimed as he flinched and was forced to look away when the explosion from the research facility produced a wave of heat that overwhelmed his smart gun's infra red targeting system.

"What the hell was that?" Sellers exclaimed.

"The research facility. Part of it just exploded." Lawrence said as he rushed from the APC wreck, raised his binoculars and tried to pinpoint exactly where the explosion had taken place. Unfortunately the facility was not in sight from this location and all that was visible now were the flames and a plume of smoke rising up into the already dull sky

"Maddie you spent more time than any of us looking around that place. Can you tell what just blew up?"

Williams asked as they exited the APC behind Lawrence.

"Tricky from this distance." Maddie replied, "There's a lot of storage in that section. I saw less than half of what was there so-"

"So what?" Lawrence said when Maddie suddenly stopped talking and then she smiled.

"Can't you hear that?" she asked.

"Hear what?" Sellers replied.

"Crack. Crack. Crack. Crack." Maddie said.

"Ammunition cooking off." Williams said, "Their armoury just went up."

"The armoury would be in that direction." Maddie added.

"Right, we're moving out." Williams ordered, "If Venice and her people are distracted by both the aliens and now a fire then this is the best opportunity we're going to get."

"What's going on out there? Freeman can you read me?" Venice said into her radio headset.

"Of course he can't he's dead." Oliver replied and he pointed to the Tac where the feed from Freeman's own camera was now nothing but static, "So much for his plan to organise us all into a militia."

"Miss Venice our security force has returned, they're coming through the main lock now." one of the command centre technicians announced, "What shall I tell them to do?"

"I want a squad of them up here right now." Venice ordered, "The rest are to split up and sweep the entire facility. Move section by section and clear them."

"The alien in the armour dropped from the vent." Oliver pointed out.

"The guards have motion trackers. Tell them to check the vents in each section as well. Now where are those engineers to seal the door?" Venice asked and after extinguishing the cigarette she had been smoking she immediately reached for another.

"Do you want me to check with maintenance?" a technician asked.

"No. I want us all to sit here in ignorance. Of course I want you to find out where they are!" Venice snapped and the technician reached for the intercom control on his console. However, rather than putting the feed through to his headset he accidentally switched it to the command centre speakers and so everyone present heard the screaming.

"They're defenceless. We need to send someone to help them." Oliver said.

"Get a team of guards to the power plant at once!" Venice snapped but from somewhere in the background of the signal from the maintenance section there was a sudden clattering that was followed by another alien screeching. Then there was the sound of a klaxon.

"Get out! Everyone out!" a voice yelled before there was an inhuman screeching followed by another, louder scream. Then all of a sudden all of the lights in the command went out and every console shut down.

"What happened?" Venice exclaimed as the command centre was plunged into darkness, only the handful of battery powered emergency lights that turned on automatically providing any illumination at all.

"The power plant's gone. The aliens overran it." Oliver said, "We're cut off from everyone."

"Were you able to tell the guards to get here?" Venice asked, looking at the communication technician and the man nodded.

"I told them you wanted a squad here but I didn't have time to-"

"I don't care what you didn't do. Just as long as there are troops heading here to protect us. I'll give them their orders in person if I have to."

"Sit still." Fenton said, shining a light into Ellis' eyes when he regained consciousness.

"Don't tell me to sit still private." the sergeant replied sternly, "Captain Williams is attacking those company goons and we should be there with him."

"I'm the only one here not nursing an injury." Fenton pointed out, "Garcia had a broken arm, Miller's insides will spill out if his stitches burst and the reason you're in pain every time you take a breath is because four of your ribs are broken. Mind you, if it wasn't for your armour it would likely have been your spine that broke in the fall. Now sit still while I check on you."

"Something's burning." Miller said from the opening in the side of the derelict ship.

"Our platoon must have hit them hard." Ellis said.

"I don't think so sarge." Garica replied, "We've been listening in on their comms and they won't have made it there yet. Something else is going on."

"It must be more of those damned creatures then." Ellis said, "Mark my words, we don't want to be facing any more of them in this place. They're fast, real fast and strong to match. The reports weren't exaggerated."

"All the more reason for you not to take any risks sergeant. If we do encounter-" Fenton began before there was the sound of a contact on Miller's motion tracker and he grabbed hold of the device, pointing it deeper into the ship.

"I've got movement." Miller said, "Looks like one-" and then he spun to face the opening now behind him again, "No, two signals. Both sides of us."

"Captain do you read me?" Fenton transmitted as he stepped away from Ellis and picked up his pulse rifle.

"Just about Fenton, there's a lot of interference." Williams responded, his voice just about audible over the static.

"Captain we may have company. Bad company." Fenton said, "Two of them."

"Are the others fit to move?" Williams asked.

"Just about captain." Fenton answered.

"Then if your position is untenable withdraw from it. Try to make it to Bravo Team's APC. You may find extra supplies in there."

"Understood captain."

"They're getting closer." Miller said, "Both of them."

"Give me that." Garcia said suddenly and he picked up the pulse rifle propped up beside Ellis. His own smart gun had carried to the ship along with him and was also propped up against the wall but that was impossible to hold one handed whereas it was just about possible with a pulse rifle, "You say one's out there?" he added, looking at Miller and nodding in the direction of the hole in the alien ship's hull.

Miller nodded back at him and Garcia slowly advanced toward the hole leading to the outside world.

"Careful Garcia." Fenton called out, "You can't aim properly with that arm."

"Watch me. I can shoot with one hand better than you can with two Fenton." Garcia replied and he stepped through the hole, "There's nothing out here." he said as he looked around in vain for the alien but saw nothing.

"The reading's fuzzy." Miller told him, "It's probably behind something. Range twelve metres."

"There's nothing out here that close." Garcia said as he moved further from the hole at ground level of the hull and out from beneath the curvature of the hull. All of a sudden he heard the sound of something falling down the outside of the hull, bouncing off it repeatedly as it descended and he looked up. "Oh-" he said before the descending alien dropped on him from above.

"Garcia!" Miller shouted as the alien landed on top of the already injured marine and began to claw at him while he screamed.

The alien turned towards Miller suddenly, Garcia now dead and it hissed. Before the alien could act Miller dropped his motion tracker and brought up his rifle. He fired at the exact moment that the alien leapt from Garcia's body towards him and the bullets caught the creature in mid air. The impact and force of the exploding ammunition was enough to alter the path of the alien and instead of it smashing into Miller it landed on the floor in front of him. Grinning, Miller turned around to look at Fenton but when he saw the corpsman his face fell.

"What's wrong?" Fenton asked.

"Behind you." Miller said softly and as both Fenton and Ellis turned to look, the alien that had crept up on the marine while they were distracted by the one outside hissed.

Ellis reached for the belt on the floor beside him and picked it up.

"Fenton! Down!" he yelled as he pulled his pistol from its holster and then pointed it at the alien.

Even from close range the bullets did little damage to the alien but they did cause the creature to perceive Ellis as a threat and it responded to this by leaping towards him, knocking Fenton out of the way as it went to dig its jaws into the sergeant. The corpsman was hurled with enough force against the wall that there was a 'crunch' and his head fell at an odd angle as he then dropped to the floor and lay still, blood starting to seep from his nose and mouth.

Miller fired again but the alien was too fast for him and the rounds flew past the creature without hitting it before it reached Ellis. Once again though, the failed attack was enough to divert the alien's attention and it leapt from Ellis towards Miller, swinging its claws at him and ripping open his throat. This left the badly injured Ellis as the only marine left alive and the alien turned back towards him, hissing. However, Ellis was not done fighting yet and even with his blood pumping from the wound in his neck he had managed to reach for his webbing and removed grenade from it. At the same time he also managed to pick up his helmet and lifted the microphone to his mouth.

"Captain Williams," he signalled as he flicked the cap from the grenade and pressed down on the arming button, "I don't think any of us are going to make it after all." and then he released the button at the same moment the alien lunged at him.

"They're gone." Lawrence said as Williams looked back towards the alien ship, his mouth hanging open as he heard the sound of an explosion in the distance, "There's nothing more we can do."

"I should have had them move out with the rest." Williams said.

"They were injured. You tried to keep them safe." Maddie commented.

"Target!" Manchester called out suddenly and his warning was accompanied by a burst of fire from his smart gun. The round ripped through a Weyland-Yutani commando and in his death throws the commando pulled the trigger of his pulse rifle and some of the bullets struck Manchester's chest plate head on and the marine fell as well, holes punched through his armour and into his chest.

"Ambush!" Sellers shouted as he fired towards a rocky outcrop ahead when he thought he saw something moving behind it.

More of the marines fired at the same target but Lawrence checked the rocks carefully through his binoculars and saw that there was nothing moving behind it at all.

"Cease fire! Cease fire damn it!" he yelled, "You're just wasting ammo."

"Teller, Devon. Are you reading any movement?" Williams asked and the two marines checked their motion trackers, sweeping all around the platoon with them.

"Nothing captain." Devon responded.

"One man with a pulse rifle doesn't make much of an ambush." Maddie said as she walked over to the commando's body and crouched beside it.

"No. A sniper would, but he's just a regular soldier." Williams agreed.

"A deserter perhaps?" Maddie suggested, "Someone that isn't too keen on the idea of fighting aliens?"

"If he was then we could have done with taking him alive. He might have been willing to answer some questions."

"Captain I think you ought to see this." Barns announced and when Williams looked around he saw that the corporal had climbed onto another of LV-426's strange rock formations and from her elevated position she was looking towards the research facility.

"What is it corporal?" Lawrence asked as both he and Williams approached her.

"All the lights are out at the base." Barns replied.

"Something to keep them hidden from us perhaps?" Sellers suggested.

"We aren't there yet though, are we?" Maddie pointed out, "Wasn't there something in one of those reports from Hadley's Hope about the aliens interrupting the colony's power supply to disorientate the marines?"

"Yes, though Warrant Officer Ripley was never able to describe exactly how they did it." Williams said.

"If they know enough to disrupt our technology to that extent then that suggests a higher degree of intelligence than we've been giving them." Lawrence added.

"Could they be properly intelligent?" Torres asked, looking up from the body of Manchester, "Like us?"

"Oh you think you're intelligent. How cute." Maddie said and Williams glared at her as she smiled.

"Not now Maddie." he said. Then he looked at Torres and added, "It could just be related towards the species' apparent affinity for heat. Power generation inevitably creates a lot of that as well."

From the angle the marines were looking at the facility from they could see the entrance and Lawrence studied this through his binoculars.

"I don't see any guards on the way in." he said.

"They could be inside." Williams said, "Maddie how did you get out?"

"Through the new building they're working on. It connects to the research section and the door is there, its motors aren't hooked up. That's all. Of course I had an alien's help in opening them." she explained.

"Then they might still be open." Williams said.

"Yes and who knows how many of the aliens could be hanging around right inside?" Maddie responded.

"So which way is it to be captain?" Sellers asked.

"Both." Williams told him, "Sergeant Sellers, you and Bravo Team will assault the complex via the main entrance. Meanwhile Gunnery Sergeant Lawrence, Maddie and myself will accompany Alpha Team to the secondary entrance near the research centre."

"If the lights are out then use your infra red." Lawrence said, "But don't rely on just it. The aliens don't show up on infra red because of their body chemistry."

"We'll split up here and maintain radio silence until we're inside the facility." Williams ordered, "I'd like to keep a total blackout but I don't want our teams shooting at one another in the dark. Maddie, you better bring that along." and he pointed to the pulse rifle the Weyland-Yutani commando had been carrying.

"She's an android. She can't use it." Barns commented but Maddie grinned at the woman as she picked up the rifle and then took an extra magazine from one of the commando's belt pouches.

"I can't shoot a human being." she said, correcting Barns, "But those aliens aren't human."

15.

The two command centre guards had pulled the doors open so that they could watch the hallway outside. Venice had been sceptical about leaving such an obvious opening in their defences but the guards had pointed out that it would otherwise take time to open the doors to admit the reinforcements when they arrived.

One of the two guards suddenly looked at Venice as she leant on a non-functioning console and placed a hand on his helmet; radio earpiece.

"Hang on, I'm putting you through now." he said and then he took off his helmet and hurried towards Venice with it, "I've got Sergeant Cooke on the line." he said.

"Your radios are still working?" Venice said as she took the helmet and the guard nodded.

"They're all battery powered and have a built in network system." he said.

"Now you tell me." Venice said as she tried to put the helmet on only to find it much too large and lacking the time to adjust it she instead supported it so that the radio sat beside her ear as she spoke to the commando,

"Yes sergeant, go ahead." she said.

"We're inside the complex and heading for you but with all the doors closed it's slowing us down." Cooke reported.

"What about the aliens? Have you seen any?" Venice asked.

"Not yet personally. But we've come across a few bodies and I've sent men chasing down routes that look like the aliens took them. I've despatched a squad to the power plant as well. If they can get the lights back on then moving around and searching this place is going to get a lot easier."

Cooke's microphone then picked up a crashing sound, followed by scream and a pounding sound.

"Cooke! What's happening?" Venice demanded.

"Sounds like trouble behind the next door. We're trying to get through." Cooke said.

"Help me!" a voice cried out from the other side of the door and the hammering sound became more prominent while two of Cooke's men began dragging the doors open and the others aimed their pulse rifles. There was a grinding sound as the door began to open and all of a sudden a human hand reached through and a woman's face pressed itself into the gap.

"Get me out of here! There's one of those things here. It killed Thompson and when it's done eating him it'll-" and then the woman screamed again as she was suddenly pulled back to from the door, her hand slipping from the grasp of a commando who had taken hold of it.

The scream was cut off abruptly and blood spurted through the gap. Cooke rushed up to this and stood so that the lamp mounted on his armour shone through it. The beam illuminated one of the aliens, sat hunched over the body of the woman as it tore at her flesh. Sensing the light, the alien stood up to its full height as it turned to face towards the door and at that moment Cooke fired his pulse rifle through the gap. The alien gave out a momentary screech as it was hit before a round destroyed its throat and the alien collapsed in a heap on top of the woman's body.

"Get this door open now." Cooke ordered and another two of his men joined the first two to pull the door open far enough for them to be able to pass through.

In the section of hallway on the other side the commandos found two bodies in addition to that of the alien, one belonging to the woman was already in the process of dissolving from the acid blood that had sprayed over it when Cooke killed the alien while a second that was located in the centre of a large pool of blood appeared to be that of a man that had been largely devoured by the alien. The door at the other end of the section of hallway was still closed, obviously leaving the two unfortunate Weyland-Yutani employees trapped inside with the alien when it had burst out of the vent. The access grill to this lay on the floor, leaving a gaping hole into the vent itself and one of Cooke's men crept up to it, shining his light into the vent as he pointed his rifle into it as well.

"Cooke to command. We've just dealt with another one." Cooke signalled, "But you've lost two more of your staff. It looks like the alien came from the vent running above the ceiling."

"I don't care." Venice replied, "Just get to command and make sure I'm safe. Then we'll figure out the best way to clear the complex of the aliens."

In the command centre Venice suddenly noticed that several of the technicians on duty were staring at her.

"What?" she snapped as she lit up a fresh cigarette, "If the aliens get in here then we're all done for."

"Do you have to keep doing that?" Oliver said suddenly.

"What?" Venice replied.

"Smoking those things. With the power out the air isn't circulating and I'd rather not choke to death on your smoke."

"What's the matter Oliver? Worried you won't get the chance to be killed by an alien?" Venice said and she

purposely exhaled smoke towards him, making him cough as he flinched.

The team sent to investigate the power plant found the doors to that section wide open, frozen that way when the power needed to close them again was cut off while the power workers were still attempting to flee from the aliens that had burst from the ventilation system. As well as the bodies of half a dozen workers there were the remains of a pair of androids that had attempted to intervene to prevent the deaths of humans. However, despite their strength the unarmed androids had proved no match for the aliens and they had been torn apart and discarded by the aliens that had no further use for them. The aliens had not come out of the fight completely unscathed though and there were signs of acid damage in several places where the workers had been able to improvise weapons that had still been ultimately useless.

"This place looks like a slaughterhouse." the commando team leader said.

"It was." an echoing voice said from the darkness and the commandos turned and pointed their weapons towards the sound of the voice, knowing that no-one could have survived what had happened here. But when they saw the source of the voice it was immediately obvious how the owner had survived.

He had never been alive to begin with.

The android's body had been cut in half and pinned to the floor when an alien's blood had eaten through the supports for a coolant tank and it had collapsed. Now the android's mind was still active even though its body had been crippled and he was looking towards the commandos.

"What happened here?" the team leader asked.

"Aliens. Six of them came from the vents." the android replied, white fluid dripping from its mouth, "We tried to fight but they were too strong. Foster got lucky and got one in the neck with a fire axe but its blood got him and spilled onto the distribution box over by that wall. That's what caused the power to go out. The generator itself just went into automatic shut down."

"Can it be fixed?" the commando leader asked.

"Given time almost anything can be fixed. Though I doubt that I shall be worth the effort." the android said in a somewhat melancholy manner.

"Just tell me what needs doing."

"The distribution box has three circuits running from the main generator output. All you need to do is bypass the damaged input, remove any debris causing shorts and restart the generator." the android explained.

"Check it out." the commando leader told one of his men and the other commando hurried to the distribution box that had obviously been sprayed with acid before using the butt of his pulse rifle to break it open without risking touching it with his bare hands.

"This thing's been trashed inside as well." he said, "The top two connections are gone completely and the one at the bottom doesn't look too great. If it hadn't been larger than the other two I'd say it would have been eaten through as well."

"Oh dear." the android said, "That complicates matters."

"What does it mean?" the commando team leader asked, sighing.

"It means that the power circuits for the lighting and doors have been destroyed. You would have to rig up a bypass on the entire box and that would take at least an hour for a qualified engineer." the android said, "The main power will still function but the current will be limited. If any of the high powered systems are used then the circuit could burn out."

"Will the intercom work? And what about security cameras?"

"Oh yes, those systems require very little power compared to heating, air conditioning and interstellar communications."

"Then we'll do it. Comms and security should help us get this place back under control."

The first indication that Venice and the other staff in the command centre had that power to some systems had been restored was the humming of fans inside power supplies as they started up and control consoles began to reboot. The lights however, remained out.

"We've got the main circuit power back." Oliver said as he watched a console restarting, "No lights though."

"Get that door sealed." Venice ordered and one of the guards nodded before attempting to operate the door.

"It's not functioning." he replied when the door failed to move.

"Doors and lights are both on separate circuits." a technician explained before the intercom activated.

"Miss Venice I've got Corporal Sanders on the line for you." another technician announced and Venice hurried towards his console.

"Put him through." she said, picking up another headset and putting it on.

"Miss Venice you should have mains power again." the leader of the commando squad told her.

"When do we get lighting and door control?" Venice asked.

"Not soon. It was all my men could do to get the mains circuit back online. The others were destroyed by-"

"Miss Venice!" a technician called out suddenly from across the command centre and she turned towards him, "We've got marines coming in through the main entrance."

Venice looked at one of the monitors above the technician's console and she saw the marines of Bravo Team forming up around the main entrance, the doors of which remained wide open due to the lack of power to close them again.

"Alert all guards." she exclaimed, "We have intruders. Tell them to shoot to kill."

"Captain we're in position." Sellers reported as he peered through the large open doorway into the darkness of the research facility, "The front door is wide open and unguarded."

"Excellent timing sergeant." Williams replied as he peered around a steel girder at the partially open door Maddie had used to escape the complex, "We're in position to enter the research section. Proceed inside and attempt to locate the command centre."

"Yes captain. Proceeding inside now." Sellers responded.

"I don't see any signs of a guard here either." Lawrence commented as he studied the entrance that lay before Alpha Team.

"If the aliens are loose then Venice is probably more concerned about what's already inside." Williams said, "Now let's get going. Preston you're on point."

The smart gun operator nodded and dashed towards the door, keeping his weapon trained on the narrow opening until he was just a few metres away.

"Clear." he reported and the other marines followed after him, running past him and taking up positions either side of the gap. Although both Maddie and the alien had been able to squeeze through this the bulk of the armour and equipment carried by the marines, particularly Preston's smart gun, meant that they could not get through.

Maddie grabbed hold of one section of the door and pulled as hard as she could but it was only when Lawrence and O'Hern joined her that between them they were able to pull the doors further apart.

"Go." Williams said and Perez darted through the doorway with Teller close behind her.

"I'm picking up movement. Range fifteen metres and closing." Teller announced as he checked his motion tracker.

"That's too close to be Bravo Team." Lawrence said and all of a sudden an alien came bounding around a corner and screeched as it charged towards the marines.

Perez squeezed the trigger of her flame unit for just a moment, sending a jet of burning liquid at the creature just as it was about to leap towards her and Teller. The flames engulfed the alien and it let out another, louder, screeching sound as its limbs flailed about while it burned. Without waiting to see how long it would take the flames to kill the alien and also well aware that its screeching was giving away the marines' position, Lawrence fired a short burst from his pulse rifle that finished it off instantly.

"Any more?" he asked, looking at Teller.

"No gunny. Wait, I've got something. Not much but its movement. Twenty, maybe twenty-five metres that way." the marine with the motion tracker replied and he pointed, "The reading isn't clear though.

"The research section." Maddie said, looking at Williams and he nodded.

"Advance." he said, "Teller hang back and keep that tracker on line, we can't afford to let the aliens take us by surprise in here."

Preston moved forwards to take up the point position, covering the corridor ahead with his smart gun as he advanced and Perez moved along beside him so that the line of fire for her flame unit was kept clear. Teller then followed these two, pointing the motion tracker between them. Being used while it was itself moving made the motion tracker less accurate than when stationary but the operating firmware was capable of monitoring its own motion and compensating for most of this, leaving only the most sudden movements of the device to disrupt its operation.

"Ten metres." Teller said softly, "I think there's more than one target."

Just then an ear splitting scream came from ahead and the marines halted.

"Help me!" a voice cried out, "Somebody help me!"

"Move!" Williams ordered and the marines broke into a run that led them to the destroyed door leading to the holding pens. As they looked through the massive hole that had been burned in the door they saw a pair of aliens at the far end of the hallway. Both of these appeared to be regurgitating the resin substance the creatures built their nest from, spreading it out with their hands but the most disturbing part of this was that they were also holding a Weyland-Yutani technician up against the wall and were smearing the resin over him to bind him in place.

Preston fired his smart gun. Remembering that the alien's blood would be released by the explosive rounds he aimed the smart gun low, targeting it manually to avoid hitting the creatures centre mass and spraying their blood across the helpless man.

One of the aliens was hit and it collapsed to the floor as one of its legs exploded beneath the knee joint, screeching in pain. However, the second alien immediately leapt out of the way and by grabbing hold of the resin that already coated much of the wall that was lined with holding pens. Perez swung her flame unit upwards, hoping to be able to take a shot at the alien now that it was clear of the captive man but Williams

was quicker and he fired a single shot from his pulse rifle that hit the alien in its shoulder. This blew off the alien's arm just as it was using it to support its weight and the creature dropped to the floor. Both aliens were now crippled but still alive and they did not remain still for long. The one at the far end of the hallway began to drag itself along the floor at a surprising speed. However, all this did was take it further from the captive man and Preston fired the smart gun again, this time putting half a dozen explosive rounds into its head and torso and the resulting internal explosions tore it apart. Just as Preston had expected the alien's acid blood erupted from the ruined corpse, spraying across the transparent fronts of the pens either side of it and there was a loud hissing sound as they started to dissolve where the liquid hit them. Meanwhile the second alien used its one remaining arm to pull itself back to its feet but before it could launch itself at the marines again it was engulfed in flames from Perez's incinerator before being torn apart by a volley of fire from the marines armed with pulse rifles.

"Oh thank God!" the man at the end of the hallway called out, "Get me out of here please."

"Hang on we'll be right there." Maddie responded as the marines advanced along the hallway, checking each pen as they past it to make sure that there were no more aliens hiding inside any of them. They found no more aliens in the pens but they did see that most of the insides were now covered with the secreted creatures' resin and here and there they found another member of the Weyland-Yutani staff cocooned in this. "Do they have those creatures inside them as well?" Perez asked, remembering the nest the marines had found in the derelict alien ship with more cocooned men in it.

"There's nothing inside me I promise you." the man cocooned against the wall called out, "Get me down from here."

"None of these men have been impregnated." Williams said, "There are no eggs here."

"Eggs." Maddie said suddenly.

"What about eggs?" Lawrence asked.

"Venice has hundreds of them in storage. All in containers just like the ones we found aboard the *Sulaco*." Maddie said.

"Then if the aliens find them they'll be able to use them to impregnate these men." Williams said.

"I can show you where they are if you get me down from here." the technician said.

"I already know where they are. How else would I know about them?" Maddie pointed out.

"But you can't just leave me here." the man said.

"O'Hern, Perez, break him loose." Lawrence ordered and the marines stepped forwards.

"Wait, belay that order." Williams said before they could reach the man.

"What are you doing?" he exclaimed.

"A good question. We can't spare the men to guard him." Lawrence said.

"We don't need to." Williams replied, "In fact this is probably the safest place for him. The aliens don't have the eggs yet or they'd have brought them here to the nest they're building. That means stuck against that wall is the one place where the aliens won't harm him."

Sellers and the rest of Bravo Team could feel the heat of the fire that was still burning around the armoury when they passed through another door in a neighbouring section. Since entering the complex they had followed a trail of already open doorways, reasoning that the Weyland-Yutani commandos had taken this route and would be heading to secure the command centre themselves.

"Keep sharp." Sellers said, "If those things really are attracted to heat then they'll be drawn in this direction."

"Movement!" Devon snapped as his motion tracker registered something approaching and the marines spun to face in the same direction, all raising their weapons to their shoulders before a man in Weyland-Yutani overalls appeared around the corner.

"You should not be here." he said calmly, "The armoury fire is not yet under control."

Sellers smiled.

"It's a robot." he said.

"What do we do about it sarge?" Devon asked.

"Easy. We shut it down so it can't tell anyone about us." Sellers said, "Or rather you do Devon. You're our tech."

Devon nodded and rushed towards the android that stood in the hallway staring at the marines. However, just as he reached the machine the ventilation grill above it flew out of its mount as an alien burst from the vent. Devon gasped as the creature landed right in front of him and spun to face him, using its tail to lash out at the android before it could intervene to try and prevent him from being harmed. The force of the tail swing snapped the android's spine and tore through its flesh, cutting the machine in two and the two halves landed beside one another.

Already holding his pulse rifle, Devon had time to raise the weapon and he fired it just as the alien lunged towards him. Firing from point blank range, he could not easily miss the alien and all of his shots punched through its toughened exoskeleton. The alien promptly burst open like a balloon and Devon was showered in its blood.

"Devon!" Sellers yelled as the marine screamed and dropped to his knees, his pulse rifle falling from his grasp as it began to dissolve and when it hit the floor it broke into pieces.

The rest of the marines hurried forwards to see if they could help Devon but by the time they reached him he had already fallen silent and it was clear that he was dead.

"What about the tracker?" Reagan asked and Sellers looked around to see Devon's motion tracker on the floor beside his body, its display cracked and melted from the acid.

"You can pick it up you want Reagan." he said, "But I'd suggest asbestos gloves if you're going to try."

The sergeant then noticed the upper half of the android was still active, its head turning to watch the marines.

"How do we get to the command centre from here?" he asked it.

"I'm sorry." the android responded, its voice badly distorted because of the damage it had suffered, "You are not cleared for such information."

"Fair enough." Sellers said, shrugging, "But that means you're no use to us." and then he shot the android in the head, "Come on," he told his men, "let's keep following this path."

Cooke and his team were close to the command centre, with just two more doors to force open before they reached their destination. They had encountered no further aliens since the first one but his men remained cautious, knowing that the creatures remained loose somewhere. However, it was not the aliens that the commandos detected first.

"Movement behind us." the commando monitoring the team's motion tracker while his comrades attempted to force open the next door blocking their path.

"Keep working on that door." Cooke ordered as he turned around, "Everyone else cover that hallway."

The commandos turned and pointed their pulse rifles back down the hallway. There was movement in the darkness, beyond the distance that the commandos' lamps would illuminate clearly and one of Cooke's men fired instinctively. The rounds missed their intended target and instead took several chunks out of the wall at the corner. Then there was the flash of gunfire from the corner and one of Cooke's men was hit.

"Colonial marines!" Sellers yelled, "Drop your weapons!"

"Open fire." Cooke ordered and his commandos all began to fire towards the marines as they fired back from around the corner, "How's that door going?" he added.

"Almost there sarge." one of the commandos by the door replied and then there was a grinding sound as it began to open. One of the commandos pushed his hand into the gap to try and get a better grip but before he could start to apply pressure a clawed hand grabbed his arm from the other side of the door and attempted to drag him through the gap.

"It's got me!" he cried out as the second commando swore. Rather than take the time to unslung his pulse rifle he drew his pistol and pushed it through the gap before firing repeatedly. The alien screeched as the bullets struck it but did not let go of the first commando until a lucky shot pierced the creature's exterior and it withdrew. At the same time there was a brief spurt of blood that splashed over both commandos, striking the first on his arm while the second was hit on the hand holding his pistol and both men fell away from the door screaming in pain.

Around the corner Sellers heard this.

"Looks like we've got more than just a few mercenaries to worry about." he said, "Reagan, are you ready with that incinerator?"

"Sure sarge, but one shot to the tank and we'll be roasted." the other marine replied.

"Don't worry. They won't be shooting at us when I ask you to use it." Sellers said and he moved the slide of the grenade launcher mounted beneath his pulse rifle back and forth to chamber a round. Then he leant around the corner and there was a 'pop' as he fired the grenade, "Fire in the hole!" he yelled and the other marines all ducked back around the corner to shield them from the blast.

"Down!" Cooke yelled when he heard the discharge of the grenade launcher as well as Sellers' shout and his men threw themselves the floor. The grenade then sailed over their heads before striking the door behind them and detonating. Blasting a large hole through the door, the grenade also hurled flames and fragments back down the hallway. Many of these fragments hit the commandos who, despite lying prone were still out in the open.

"Reagan now!" Sellers snapped and the incinerator armed marine leapt around the corner and filled the hallway with flames.

The burning liquid engulfed not only the remaining Weyland-Yutani commandos in the hallway but also the aliens on the other side of the door as it flowed through the narrow gap and Reagan ducked back behind the corner just as the ammunition carried by the commandos began to cook off and fly around the hallway.

"Well done Reagan." Seller said, "We'll give it a minute for things to settle down and then get moving again. The command centre should be right up ahead."

16.

"What the hell was that?" Venice said when she heard the muffled sound of an explosion.

"It sounded like a grenade." one of the guards by the door said.

"A grenade?" Oliver exclaimed and he looked at Venice, "Those marines you pissed off are willing to demolish this place to get to us."

"Shut up Oliver!" Venice snapped at him and then she turned to a nearby technician, "Get me Sergeant Cooke." she ordered.

"Cooke's gone." Oliver said, "His entire squad is gone. Look." and he pointed to the bank of monitors showing the camera feeds from the commandos. These had reactivated with the rest of the control systems in the command centre and now the feed from Cooke's camera was blank.

"Who's closest?" Venice responded as she hurried to the TOC and looked at the remaining feeds. According to the feeds there were still a dozen commandos remaining, including the two already present in the command centre. With four protecting the power plant this left just six commandos sweeping the complex for any signs of the aliens, organised into three pairs of soldiers. Before Venice could determine which of these pairs was closest to the command centre there was a sudden 'clump' from the vent overhead and she looked up.

"They're in the vent!" one of the technicians who had been given a pistol exclaimed and he leapt to his feet and began to fire the weapon at the vent where the sound had come from.

The bullets easily punched through the lightweight alloy plating used to construct the vent and one also managed to pierce the toughened exoskeleton of the alien inside it. The wound was not severe and did no more to the alien than make it screech, but as the wound bled the acidic blood dropped onto the bottom of the vent and immediately began to eat through it with a 'hiss'. Hearing this sound Venice leapt backwards before any of the blood could drop onto her and she saw it instead splash over a nearby console and begin to eat into that instead. Then two things happened at once. Firstly the acid blood ate into the console enough to reach the electronics and there was a flash accompanied by an acrid smell as the circuitry shorted out and caught fire, shutting down the TOC and cutting off the remaining camera feeds. More importantly though the vent itself became so weakened by the dripping acid that it was left unable to support the weight of the alien inside it and the creature came crashing through it.

Venice just gasped as the creature landed right in front of her before it raised itself up to its full height and screeched at her with its clawed arms outstretched.

"Down!" a voice yelled and Venice instinctively ducked before there was the sound of pulse rifles firing as the guards opened fire as they advanced on the alien. The alien died quickly, its body falling onto the already burning console. However, despite the guards quickly dealing with that alien, it had not been alone in the vent.

A second alien leapt from the hole melted in the vent, launching itself at the pistol armed technician and the man screamed as it landed on top of him and began to savage him with its teeth. One of the guards turned and fired his pulse rifle at the alien, deciding that even if the technician was still alive he would not live much longer and having him burned by the alien's blood was a price worth paying to deal with the creature.

Meanwhile the other guard fired into the vent as yet another alien crawled into view. His burst split the alien wide open and its blood splashed all around the inside of the vent, causing the entire thing to collapse and turning a hole just large enough to allow an adult alien through into a massive gap in the vent from which more of the creatures burst into the command centre.

"Out!" Venice yelled, "Everyone out!" and she turned and ran for the door, grateful for the fact that she had ordered it to be left open. However, as the command staff began to evacuate a grill burst off another part of the vent running across the ceiling and yet another alien jumped down into the command centre. This landed beside one of the guards and as he swung his pulse rifle around to face it the alien knocked it from his hand before using its inner jaws to punch a hole through his forehead just beneath the rim of his helmet. Venice and Oliver were almost at the door at this point but both turned around just as the guard fell dead and another alien jumped from the vent, trapping the rest of the command staff beyond them. With only two people at the door and several times that number in the other direction, both aliens turned their attention to the greater number of prey. Meanwhile the aliens that continued to spill from the hole burned in the vent charged en masse towards the last remaining guard. With nowhere to go the man stood his ground and continued to fire his pulse rifle, shooting dead one alien after another until his weapon was empty and he vanished from view, screaming and cursing as he was buried under a pile of aliens that leapt on top of him. Oliver quickly darted back to the body of the dead guard close to the doorway and Venice thought that he may have been about to try and retrieve the man's pulse rifle. However, instead of the weapon he rummaged through the guard's webbing for something.

"Oliver come on!" Venice snapped as she heard the sound of someone or something trying to force open the door just down the corridor, "We don't have time to hang around."

"I'm coming." Oliver responded and the pair ran from the command centre, heading in the opposite direction to the door that was being attacked.

"Captain we're almost at the command centre. Just one door to go." Sellers reported and Williams smiled when he heard this.

"That's excellent news sergeant. We're probably about ten or fifteen minutes behind you." he responded.

"Well it sounds like we didn't make it here first sir." Sellers continued, "We can hear shooting and screaming from the other side of the door."

"Take whatever precautions you feel are necessary sergeant." Williams told him, "If the command centre is already lost then we'll head for where the alien eggs are being stored to deal with them instead."

Torres and Barns were able to drag the door open about twenty centimetres before there was a loud scream from the other side and human blood sprayed through the gap, causing both marines to leap back in surprise. Then a pair of clawed hands appeared in the gap and continued to push the doors apart.

"Back!" Sellers yelled as he brought up his pulse rifle and Torres and Barns withdrew further to avoid the acid splash as Sellers opened fire.

The alien burst apart when it was hit by several explosive rounds and its blood splashed over both halves of the doors and began to melt through them, producing a much larger gap. The alien's dying scream attracted the attention of the others of its kind inside the command centre and they burst through the doorway into the hallway. When Reagan saw them through the hole in the door that was still widening from the effects of the dead alien's acid blood he pointed his flame unit towards them but he held his fire when he saw that both Torres and Barns were still standing in the way.

"Get clear!" he yelled at them but his warning came too late and both marines were still unslinging their weapons when the next alien leapt through the hole in the door and knocked Torres to the floor. Barns was able to fire his own rifle through the hole at another alien as he retreated away from the door. Meanwhile Torres thrust his pulse rifle up under the jaws of the alien that had just landed on top of him and pulled the trigger. This blew the head off the alien but its blood poured out over his armoured chest plate as well as splashing across his arms and face. Frantically he began fumbling with the clasps of his armour, ignoring the pain as the acid burned his skin.

All of a sudden there was the roar of a flamethrower discharging as Reagan took advantage of his clear line of fire. The rapidly fired blast struck another alien head on just as it was coming through the hole in the door and it fell backwards, convulsing and screeching.

This convinced the remaining aliens that they could not simply charge down the hallway at the marines and they pulled back into the command centre. This enabled Barns to rush to help Torres, ripping off what remained of the corpsman's chest armour and hurling it aside. Fortunately the acid was far more efficient at eating through metallic compounds than organic tissue and although he was badly burned Torres remained alive.

"Come on doc, let's get you out of here." Barns said as he pulled the injured marine to his feet and supported him as they headed back towards the rest of Bravo Team. However, before they could make it Washington saw something move in the vent right above him and he immediately realised that when the aliens had retreated from the hallway outside the command centre they had not fled. Instead they had sought out another route of attack that was undefended.

"They're above us!" he shouted just as the alien reached down and dragged the corporal back up into the vent.

"Washington! Reagan get ready with that incinerator." Sellers exclaimed as he grabbed hold of Washington's legs and tried to pull him free of the alien's grasp while Reagan pointed his weapon at the access to the vent. Although the alien was significantly stronger than Sellers it could not lift the weight of two marines and all Sellers had to do to keep Washington from being taken into the vent was to keep hold of him. However, sensing that it was not going to be successful in its efforts to drag its prey away the alien opted for another mode of attack instead and it suddenly leapt out of the vent while still holding Washington and it sent both the marines beneath it flying backwards as it landed right in front of Reagan. Before the marine could use his incinerator though the alien used its tail like a whip, striking Reagan across his face as well as knocking the flame unit from his hands. Then as it dived at the stunned marine more of the aliens began to jump down from the vent after it. Initially these went for Sellers and Washington before either marine could pick themselves up and defend themselves but the later creatures bounded long the hallway towards where Barns was still supporting Torres.

Barns just had time to bring his pulse rifle up and using one hand he fired it from his hip, blasting apart another alien but his weapon clicked empty and he stared in horror at the ammo counter that now read zero as the first of the aliens charged into him and Torres.

"This way!" Oliver yelled and he grabbed hold of Venice to drag her along a side corridor. The doors along this route were already open, making it obvious that they were not the first to come this way since the power cut.

"Wait, this leads to the research section." Venice responded.

"I know. Hurry up. I've got an idea to get us out of here." Oliver told her and she followed him down the corridor.

There was the sound of running from up ahead and Oliver ground to a sudden halt just as a pair of commandos appeared from around a junction up ahead.

"Miss Venice," one said, "are you unharmed?"

"I'm fine." she replied, nodding, "But the command centre has been overrun. You need to get in touch with the other teams and do something about it."

"Yes ma'am. We'll-" the commando began before Oliver unexpectedly raised his pistol and shot the man from point blank range, the bullet hitting him in the throat. As the commando collapsed, clamping his hands at his throat in a vain effort to stem the bleeding his comrade turned and raised his pulse rifle. Oliver was quicker though and he also turned to face the second commando, shooting him in the face before he could fire while Venice looked on in horror.

"What the hell are you-" she began before Oliver turned around again and thrust the pistol into her face as he grabbed hold of her again.

"Shut up and move!" he yelled at her, "I'm getting out of here and you're my ticket."

"What do you mean?" Venice replied as Oliver began to drag her along the corridor.

"The marines are the only way off this rock now." Oliver said, "They came here to find out what we're doing and I'm going to give them the answers they want in exchange for safe passage. That includes handing you over to them."

"You think they'll give you an amnesty Oliver? Immunity from your part in this project? Well if I'm going to spend the rest of my life in prison I'm not going there alone." Venice said.

"Frankly I don't give a damn if I do sit in a cell for the next fifty years as long as I'm alive to serve that sentence." Oliver said before he halted in front on the door to the egg storage room. Keeping his pistol, trained on Venice he was able to pull back the lightweight door and then he waved the pistol towards the open doorway, "Get inside." he ordered her and Venice complied.

Oliver followed her into the room that was still filled with large plastic drums containing alien eggs harvested from the derelict starship. Oliver then looked around quickly and pointed to a pipe that ran from the ceiling to the floor close to the nearest wall, "Over there. Hands around the pipe." he told Venice as he reached into his pocket and removed a set of plastic handcuffs ties that he had taken from the dead commando in the command centre.

"You have got to be kidding me." Venice said and then Oliver fired his pistol just past her and she screamed as she ducked.

"Now!" Oliver snapped and Venice backed towards the pipe before wrapping her arms around it. He quickly moved to bind Venice's wrists together and she winced as he pulled the plastic ties tight so that she could not pull her hands free. Then he began to back towards the door, while keeping his pistol trained on her, "Now I'm going to go and find those marines and bring them back here." he said and he saw Venice's eyes widen and her jaw drop as she looked in his direction.

Then from behind him Oliver heard a hiss.

He spun around find himself face to face with an alien standing in the doorway and it dived towards him just as he brought up his pistol. The impact of the alien sent Oliver flying backwards and the pair crashed into a stack of containers that held alien eggs and they were knocked over, the lids flying off several of them in the process. As he fell Oliver was able to push the muzzle of his pistol up against the alien's ribcage and he fired just at the moment that the creature extended its inner jaws to punch a hole through his forehead.

Venice stared as both Oliver and the alien went limp and lay still. It was obvious that they had both killed one another and that neither would be a threat to her. However, she was still tied to the pipe she could not take advantage of this to escape. Hoping that she would be able to wear down the plastic ties binding her Venice began to move her hands up and down, pulling the ties against the metal pipe.

This was interrupted when Venice heard the sound of one of the aliens eggs peeling open and she looked towards the toppled containers to see that where the lids had been knocked off them one of the eggs they held was starting to open. Then as she watched in horror the spindly legs of a facehugger started to appear from the opened egg and she returned to frantically trying to break out of the handcuff ties.

The ties remained intact, however and when Venice paused to rest she glanced back towards the eggs she saw no signs of the facehuggers at all. She doubted that the creatures would have just left while she was still in the room and she looked around, desperately trying to determine where the facehugger had gone to but she could not locate the creature and she quickly turned back towards the handcuffs. As she did this the facehugger suddenly launched itself towards her from the top of another drum that still contained an unhatched egg. The creature landed on Vencie's shoulder and she let out a brief scream before it jumped

from her shoulder to her face and thrust its proboscis down her throat at the same time as it wrapped its tail around the outside of her neck. As it did this the facehugger also released the neurotoxin used to fully subdue a host and Venice collapsed into a heap on the floor at the bottom of the pipe.

17.

The infra red targeting system of Preston's smart gun detected the pair of Weyland-Yutani commandos before they realised the marines were there and he fired a rapid burst, letting the automatic targeting system do its work so that the bullets formed tight clusters of hole in the centre of the commandos' chests.

"Be careful, there could be more of them." Lawrence said and the marines aimed their weapons at the corner the commandos had just come around while Teller checked his motion tracker.

"No movement." he said.

"I've got nothing on IR either." Preston added.

"Forwards." Williams ordered and the marines advanced as far as the corner. Turning this they found themselves looking down a short corridor that had blood splattered across one wall and the body of a Weyland-Yutani technician as well as the remains of an android slumped on the floor beside it. Two doors led from this corridor, one of which stood open while the other was closed.

"That door takes us towards the egg storage room." Maddie said and Williams nodded.

"Teller. Perez. Open the door." he ordered and the two marines dashed forwards to try and pull the doors apart. However, on this occasion the doors would not move at all.

"This is taking too long." Lawrence said.

"Maddie, where does that lead?" Williams asked, looking at the open doorway.

"The power plant and several machine shops." Maddie answered.

"Getting the power back on would make getting around a lot easier." Lawrence pointed out and Williams nodded.

"Maddie can we get to the eggs from the power plant without having to come back this way?" he asked and Maddie nodded as well.

"There's a corridor that leads around the back." she said, "It leads all the way to the command centre but the corridor beyond that door joins onto it part way along."

"How long do you think it will take to get through that door?" Williams said, looking towards Teller and Perez.

"It's not shifting at all captain." Perez replied, glancing over her shoulder at Williams.

"In that case we're heading for the power plant." Williams said.

"Okay you heard the captain." Lawrence said, "Move out. Preston you've got point."

The commandos holding the power plant raised their weapons when they heard the sound of people running towards them but lowered them again when the final two commandos came rushing into the room.

"What's it like out there Potter?" Sanders asked.

"Dead." one of the newly arrived commandos replied, "We've not seen a soul. Not one that's alive anyway. Those creatures must have got them all."

"No sign of Venice?" Sanders said and Potter shook his head.

"None. I guess even that chain smoking bitch was no match for the aliens." he answered.

"We're probably the only ones left alive in here corporal. What are we going to do?." another commando said.

Sanders turned to look at what remained of the android that had explained to them how to bring the mains power back on line.

"Can this thing be set to overload?" he asked, nodding towards the reactor.

"Of course." the android said, "As part of the mission emergency protocol that function was included."

"And what sort of yield are we talking about?"

"Not very large. Perhaps equivalent to a two-hundred kilotonne fusion bomb. Enough to destroy this facility as well as the alien ship."

"How far away will we need to get and how long will we have to do it in?" Sanders asked.

"About fifty kilometres ought to keep you clear of the blast and the amount of time is configurable from two minutes to ten hours. There is an abort system though. That expires ten minutes prior to. After that the pressure build up in the reactor will have reached a critical point and even stopping the build up will require venting enough plasma to incinerate the entire complex." the android explained.

"Can anyone abort the countdown?"

"No. Only the person who initiates the destruct sequence, or an executive of higher rank can abort it." the android replied.

"Good, because I don't want the marines to be able to just walk in here after we've gone and shut it down. Okay this is what we're going to do." Sanders said, turning towards the other commandos, "We'll rig the reactor to blow in five hours. Then we'll just get in a couple of rovers and drive. We can easily cover fifty clicks in five hours." then he looked back at the android, "Tell me how it's done." he said.

"The panel is right beside you. Just open it up and follow the instructions." the android told him.

"Movement." Teller whispered, holding up his hand when his motion tracker was triggered.

"Let me see." Maddie replied softly and she leant over to look at the device's display screen, "That's right inside the power plant." she added, turning towards Williams.

"I take it that using grenades to clear the room would be a bad idea." Lawrence commented and Maddie nodded.

"Bad. Very bad." she said, "'Boom' bad. In fact we'll have to be careful using pulse rifles and Preston's smart gun as well. If we damage the reactor then it could overload and blow everything for dozens of kilometres in every direction sky high."

"At least that will take care of the aliens and the ship." Williams said, lifting his pulse rifle, "Check your targets though, I'd rather not die today. Maddie take the motion tracker and let us know if anyone else approaches. I don't want to be outflanked."

With their weapons held at the ready the marines advanced towards the power plant while Maddie followed with the motion tracker in her hands. All of a sudden a Weyland-Yutani commando leant around the open doorway and pointed his pulse rifle in the marines' direction. However, before he could fire Preston was able to fire his smart gun and the burst of explosive rounds ripped the commando apart.

"Looks like they know we're here." Lawrence said before another of the commandos held his pulse rifle around the doorway and fired it randomly into the hallway.

"Down!" Williams yelled and he threw himself on top of Maddie.

A round from the pulse rifle still clipped Maddie's arm but it did not penetrate deep enough to detonate, instead leaving her with a gash across her arm. White fluid still sprayed from the wound though and when it splashed into Williams' face he feared the worst, "Maddie are you okay?" he asked as the other marines returned fire.

Inside the power plant Sanders looked up from the console he was working at, setting the fusion reactor to overload.

"I need five more minutes. Hold them off." he said.

A hail of bullets from a smart gun came in through the doorway at an angle, impacting against the wall beyond and blasting chunks out of it but the volley was suddenly cut off as the weapon's magazine emptied and another commando took advantage of the lull to quickly fire his pulse rifle into the corridor. A round clipped Preston's chest plate under his arm and detonated, blowing a hole in the armour and sending shrapnel into his side. The gunner screamed as he collapsed, blood pumping from the wound.

"Maddie see to him." Williams ordered as he got up into a kneeling position and fired several rapid shots towards the power plant while Lawrence and Perez pressed themselves up against the wall beside the door and advanced towards it and Teller joined Williams in firing at the doorway to try and keep the commandos back from it.

Crouching beside Preston, Maddie released his chest plate to expose the wound inflicted to his side and quickly unwrapped a field dressing that she pressed to the wound. All of a sudden Preston reached out his arm and Maddie grabbed hold of it.

"Stay still." she told him.

"No." he gasped, pulling his arm free and pointing. Maddie looked around and saw that he was pointing at the motion tracker she had set down so that it would not be in the way while she treated Preston's wound. The tracker was picking up the movement of the marines in the corridor, the commandos inside the power plant and also numerous other signals as the remaining aliens in the complex converged on the power plant as well.

Before she could call out a warning a pair of aliens burst from a nearby vent one after another. One launched itself towards Lawrence but he reacted in time to despatch it with a burst from his pulse rifle. The second leapt through the doorway into the power plant, crashing into one of the commandos as it did and the creature sank its teeth into his neck.

"Keep them back!" Sanders yelled as he worked frantically to complete the sequence of activating the self destruct system and behind him a commando fired at another alien as it emerged from the ventilation system. The alien screeched as it dropped to the floor, its limbs flailing. Another commando stepped closer, intending to finish off the alien but as he took aim it lashed out with its tail and knocked his legs out from under him. Then it used the barbed tip of its tail to stab him, the barb penetrating his body just beneath his armour and directed upwards into his heart before the first commando fired at it again and the alien went limp in death.

With the commandos distracted the marines made it to the doorway and positioned themselves to fire into the room. One commando turned away from the flailing alien towards the marines but Lawrence fired before him and he fell backwards, knocking Sanders away from the console.

"Destruct system primed." an automated voice announced from the console, "Awaiting final command."

"He's arming a self destruct." Williams said, "We need to get to that console and stop it."

"We'll never do that with these aliens in the way." Lawrence said.

"Perez. The vent." Williams ordered and she aimed her flame unit at the opening just as another alien jumped from it while the commando covering the vent was attempting to reload his weapon. He managed to insert a fresh magazine and brought his weapon up just as the alien struck, using its smaller jaws to punch a hole in his forehead. His finger tightened on his trigger as he died and the rounds blew a large hole in the alien's chest.

Meanwhile Perez fired her incinerator and sent a jet of burning liquid into the vent that filled it with flames. A burning alien tumbled from the vent and landed in a heap on the floor. Williams then fired his pulse rifle at the creature to make sure that it was dead before it could spread the flames inside the power plant. The alien was killed but in the process Williams' emptied his rifle's magazine and he tossed it aside, drawing his sidearm instead.

"Behind you!" Maddie called out when she saw an alien slowly crawling out of the vent in the corridor. Hearing her shout, the alien turned and leapt towards Maddie only to be caught in mid air by a burst from Lawrence's pulse rifle.

"I've got you covered." he said to Williams as another alien emerged from the vent.

Williams nodded and charged into the power plant just as Sanders was getting back to his feet and reaching for the console to activate the facility's self destruct system. Williams fired his pistol repeatedly at the commando, aiming for his chest. Each round went right where he aimed it but lacked the penetrating power to pierce his body armour. However, Sanders still felt each impact and he gasped for breath as he staggered back and stared at Williams. Then he let out a roar as he threw himself towards the console only for Williams to fire one last shot, this one aimed higher and he shot Sanders right between his eyes. The commando promptly collapsed and Williams rushed up to the control console he had been reaching for, breathing a sigh of relief when he saw that the setting of the destruct sequence had not been completed.

"We're clear." Lawrence said, rushing up behind Williams as he tapped the button labelled 'ABORT' on the console's touchscreen.

"Destruct sequence aborted." the automated voice announced.

"That's refreshing to know." Lawrence said.

"Yes it is. Now we just need to worry about how many more aliens and commandos may be at large." Williams replied.

"There are no members of staff remaining." a voice said unexpectedly and both Williams and Lawrence spun around to face the direction it came from. There they saw the damaged android that had watched the fighting in the power plant without getting involved.

"An android." Lawrence said.

"How do you know there isn't anyone left?" Williams asked, pointing his pistol at the android.

"I don't for certain. But Corporal Sanders and his men believed it to be true. That was why they were planning to abandon this facility." the android explained.

"That still leaves the aliens though." Lawrence pointed out.

"How many came through the vent just now gunnery sergeant?" Williams asked.

"Another three. Those that are left must be somewhere else."

"Where else is there that would interest them though?" Maddie pointed out and as she helped Preston through the doorway, "If we're the only ones left in the complex then there's no prey anywhere else and this reactor must be the biggest heats source."

"The eggs." Williams said, "If they are able to sense them somehow then they'd probably want them for their nest. We need to secure them as quickly as possible."

"Preston can't move quickly." Maddie pointed out.

"He can stay here. Teller and Perez as well. The rest of us are going to deal with those eggs. Perez give me that flame unit." Williams ordered.

Most of the doors between the power plant and the storage room where the alien eggs were kept were already open and Williams, Lawrence and Maddie made good time.

"Bodies." Maddie said as they neared the entrance to the storeroom and she pointed to where a pair of commandos lay dead on the floor of the corridor.

"These guys don't look like they were killed by aliens." Lawrence said as he crouched down beside one of them, "Not unless they've started figuring out how to use guns."

"Nine millimetre pistols to be exact." Williams added, nodding as he picked up a spent casing from the floor close by, "Our people didn't do this so I'm guessing that Venice must have had some trouble with staff loyalty towards the end."

"That's the storeroom right there. The eggs should be inside." Maddie said and she looked towards an open doorway.

"Then let's get this done." Williams replied and he hurried to the doorway.

The first thing he saw when he looked inside was the bodies of Oliver and the alien, a large portion of

Oliver's flesh now eaten away by the dead alien's acid blood.

"Careful." Williams said as Lawrence joined him, "Those containers are open. We don't want the eggs hatching."

"Looks like one already did." Maddie added as she entered the room as well and looked around. Turning to see what she was talking about Williams and Lawrence then saw Venice slumped against the wall, her wrists bound to the pipe and the facehugger still attached to her.

"I think Venice just became part of her own experiment." Lawrence said.

"So what do we do with her now she's like this?" Maddie asked.

"Torch her along with everything else in here." Lawrence suggested.

"We can't just leave her to die." Maddie said, looking at Williams.

"No we can't. She has information about Weyland-Yutani's activities here that could be important. She goes back with us." Williams said in agreement.

"Captain we already have prisoners in the nest and I thought the idea was to prevent any of these creatures from getting off world." Lawrence said.

"Venice was the senior executive present. She'll know more about what went on here than anyone else."

Williams pointed out, "In any case I don't plan on letting any aliens loose on Earth. We'll keep her in stasis after we get home. Maybe some day someone will come up with a way to get that thing off her face and then we'll finally have our answers." then he looked around at the containers of eggs that filled most of the room, "In the meantime I want all of these burned. Then we'll use the facility transmitter to call down the Almayr for a pick up and once we're in orbit we'll nuke this place and the alien ship. We're done here."

Epilogue.

The man entering the bar looked obviously out of place. He had tried to blend in by wearing the same style of clothing as the other patrons but his brand new clothing could not match the worn in look that everyone else's had. Ignoring the stares he got from some of those present he made his way over to a table where the man he had come to meet was sat sipping at a drink.

"Mister Fowler?" he said as he sat down, "I believe you have merchandise to sell me."

"Ah, you must be-" Fowler began.

"Please, I'd rather not have my name used in public." the man interrupted and Fowler smiled.

"Of course. There are some untrustworthy types in this establishment." he said, "I hear some of them are even interested in dangerous alien organisms." and he tossed a battered looking computer tablet across the table towards the new arrival.

Picking up the tablet the man looked at the image on it and smiled when he saw the alien egg.

"You have many of these?" he asked.

"Of course." Fowler said, "My cargo hold is full of them. Minus the few that got left on a US Colonial Marine ship that is and you can buy some or even all of them for the right price."

"Yes about that. The price you quoted seems rather high." the man said.

"Then find another supplier." Fowler told him, "Of course since I heard a rumour that the marines just nuked the only other source I have somewhat of a monopoly on the supply. Now do we have a deal or not?"