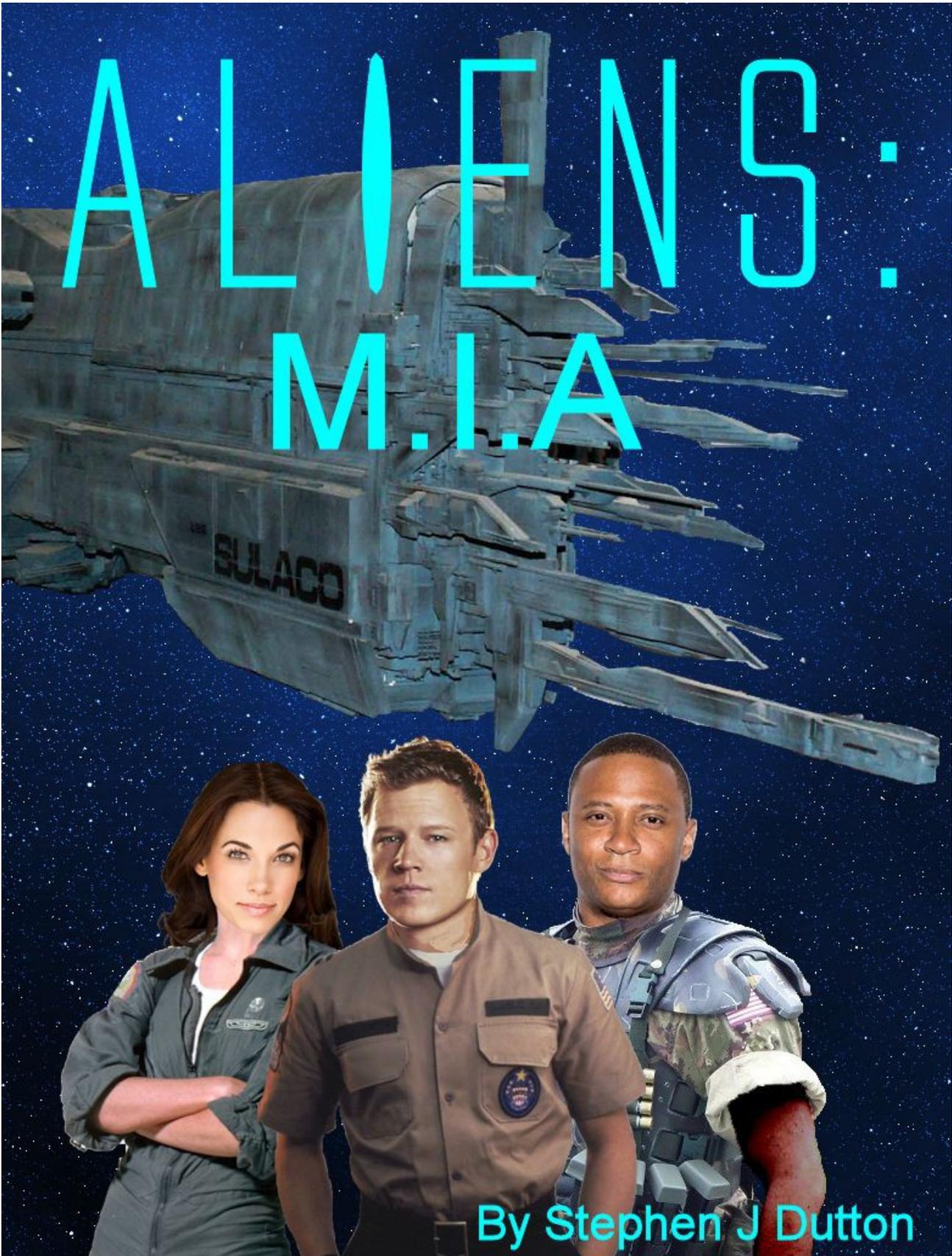


ALIENS: M.I.A.



By Stephen J Dutton

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After being reported missing along with its crew, a distress call from the the *USS Sulaco* has been detected coming from deep space. Desperate to discover what happened to the marines aboard the ship, Captain Williams of the United States Colonial Marine Corps leads another marine unit to retrieve the *Sulaco*. However, none of them can guess at the horror that awaits them aboard the vessel.

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

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1.

Ordinarily the binary star system saw only one spacecraft visit it every six months, there to resupply the maximum security correctional facility that existed on the only marginally inhabitable world in the system. Today however, two spacecraft entered the outer edges of the system. Neither of these would be seen by any of the system's permanent inhabitants, though the consequences of the visit would bring an end to their lives here. So far from an inhabited planet it was almost unheard of for spacecraft to encounter one another by accident, space was just too vast for this to be a possibility. In order for two vessels to meet. Therefore, as was the case in this instance, at least one of them had to know ahead of time where the other would be. The first of the spacecraft to arrive was a relatively small vessel, built to be able to carry a limited amount of cargo over vast distances very quickly. This vessel carried no external markings at all, no name, no decorative patterns placed on the hull by its crew and none of the Interstellar Commerce Commission mandated registration numbers required for civilian vessels. Effectively the ship was a ghost, something that according to the ICC did not even exist and yet here it was, waiting in deep space for a rendezvous. It dropped to sub light speeds soon enough to permit its occupants to emerge from hypersleep and recover in time to be aware of the signs of the second vessel approaching the system. Unlike the first ship to arrive, the *USS Sulaco* was just passing through and no stopover in this system was planned on its journey back to earth. But using authorisation codes supplied by sources within the United States Space Command the crew of the first vessel were able to override the *Sulaco's* navigation system and the larger ship also dropped to sub light speed. The occupants of the *Sulaco* remained totally unaware of this, however and they slept on in their hypersleep chambers as the smaller ship sped towards the *Sulaco* before docking with it, extending an umbilical tube between the ships that allowed a small party to cross from the smaller ship to the *Sulaco* without the need for cumbersome spacesuits.

Using more codes supplied by their sources in the USSC, the boarding party swiftly bypassed the security of the airlock and the door slid open with a hiss. The four men and two women at the front of the boarding party all pointed their weapons, a mix of pistols and shotguns that would not risk damage to the *Sulaco's* systems, into the darkened *Sulaco* airlock before advancing inside using torches to illuminate the way ahead. Though their plan called for the crew of the *Sulaco* to remain in hypersleep they were taking no chances that they could have been awakened and even now be laying in wait.

Behind this group followed two more individuals, one of them was unarmed and unlike the others wore a smart suit that made him stand out against the more well worn if practical clothing worn by the rest of the boarding party. Meanwhile the final member was dressed like the others and also had a pistol holstered under his shoulder. He could not wield his weapon like the other members of the boarding party because he was using both his hands to push a cart along in front of him on which were loaded a dozen unmarked and sealed cylindrical plastic containers painted bright yellow about a metre tall

"The hypersleep compartment is that way." the suited individual said, pointing into the darkness.

"Yeah, we studied the specs Mister Gibbs." the leader of the boarding party replied and the party continued to advance.

Though the lights aboard the *Sulaco* were out while the crew was in hypersleep, many of its other systems remained active and so the boarding party was able to make use of the elevators to take them to the level where the hypersleep compartment was located without needing to worry about how to transport the cart and its load. Once in the compartment one of the party hurried immediately to the row of hypersleep chambers and took a count of how many of them were occupied.

"Four." he called out as he walked closer to inspect them more carefully, "No wait, three. One's just the android and if you ask me it looks ready for the scrap heap, half the blasted thing is missing."

"Prepare three of them. Place them over there by the lockers. When the crew wake up they'll activate them.

Then we'll put the rest of these and the others from the ship in the main hold. They'll be safe there until our people can take possession of them at *Gateway*." Gibbs told the boarding party and they holstered and slung their weapons, now satisfied that the *Sulaco's* crew were no threat to them and began to carefully unload three of the containers from the cart. Meanwhile the man near the hypersleep chambers continued with his inspection until he got to another of the chambers and he froze in place, "Jesus Fowler, this one's just a kid." he exclaimed.

In response to this the leader of the boarding party hurried over to see what he meant.

"This is a warship, not a nursery Bennett." he said.

"Well look for yourself Fowler." Bennett responded and he shone his torch directly at the hypersleep chamber that contained what was clearly a young girl aged somewhere between ten and fourteen years old.

"He's right." Fowler said and he turned to look at Gibbs, "You never said anything about a kid." he added.

"Because I didn't know." Gibbs replied, "The transmission didn't tell us anything about how many survivors

there were or who they were. She must be one of the colonists.”

“So we’re just going ahead?” Fowler asked.

“Of course we are.” Gibbs answered as he wandered over to look at the girl in the hypersleep chamber as well, “She may just be a child but the only way we have to make certain that she doesn’t tell anyone what we’re using the *Sulaco* for is to either use her in the same way as we’re using the other two or just kill her outright.”

“Probably better to kill her now if what you’ve told us is even half true.” Fowler said.

“And lose a valuable specimen? I think not. Now you and your men have been well paid for this operation Mister Fowler, so I suggest you carry out my orders to the letter. Let me worry about the test subjects.” Gibbs said sternly.

“Sure. But next time I’ll be asking for a bigger fee.” Fowler said. Then he walked away from the suited man towards the rest of his own men who had moved the cart over to the lockers where the crew’s personal effects were stored and unloaded three of the unmarked containers, “Careful with those.” he said.

“I thought they were doped Fowler.” one of the two women in the group commented.

“Sure they are, but do you trust those geeks to know exactly what they’re doing? If they knew everything about what we’ve got here then they wouldn’t need to use a marine corps ship to smuggle them past the ICC’s quarantine. Now get you masks and gloves on.”

Each member of Fowler’s team was equipped with a respirator that covered their entire face as well as thick rubber gloves that extended up to their elbows that they donned before opening the first of the three unloaded containers. Peeling back the lid of the first of these, two members of the boarding party carefully reached down inside and acting in unison they lifted out the contents. The container held a leathery oval object about two feet tall when stood vertically. At the end now resting on the floor there were several flexible tendrils that looked like roots while the other was marked with a cross that appeared to be the seam of a sealed opening. The two team members who had lifted the object from the container now waited, holding it gently in place while another of the team began to scoop a thick fluid from the bottom of the container into a bucket and another set up a ladder beside a strut that supported the ceiling in the room.

The bucket was carried up the ladder and the contents were smeared across the strut, wall and ceiling like some sort of glue so that when the object was carried up the ladder as well it could be pressed into the fluid and stuck in place.

“Okay try it.” Fowler said to the man standing at the top of the ladder, averting his gaze away from the object he was holding and slowly the man took his hands away from the object. Fowler smiled when it remained in place, “Okay that’s it.” he said, “Next one.”

The man up the ladder then began to climb back down it. But when he was about half way down he unwittingly put his foot on a patch of the fluid that had been spilled on the ladder and he slipped, falling the rest of the way to the floor and knocking over the ladder. In turn the ladder struck the other two containers that had been removed from the cart and already unsealed, knocking both of them over with enough force to cause the contents to spill out over the floor and roll away, scattering the members of the boarding party as they cursed and dived out of the way.

“The eggs!” Gibbs shouted when he saw what had happened and came running over, “Are the eggs damaged?” then he glared at the man who had fallen from the ladder and was now picking himself up off the floor, “Those specimens are worth millions each!” he snapped, “How could you be so careless?”

“Hey, it wasn’t my fault.” the man replied angrily, “If they’re so damned important then why don’t you do this yourself?” and he pulled the mask from his face and tossed it over his shoulder where it struck the egg he had just secured to the ceiling and bounced off.

Fowler was just about to step in and diffuse the situation when there was a strange sound, like an animal caught in a confined space and desperately trying to get out. Slowly the boarding party all turned towards the egg now stuck to the ceiling and watched in horror as the four parts of the end started to peel apart.

“Run!” Fowler yelled and the members of the boarding party rushed away from the egg just moments before the creature it contained dropped to the floor.

Resembling a pair of hands fused together, the newly hatched creature also possessed a long tail that dragged behind it as it started to scuttle across the floor towards the fleeing boarding party. One member stopped running and unslung his shotgun, pointing the weapon towards the rapidly advancing creature. But before he could pull the trigger Gibbs pushed him aside.

“No! You can’t!” he yelled as the man fell sideways and landed on the other two eggs. This triggered a tearing sound as the seams sealing the eggs split and the creatures inside spilled out as the eggs themselves were squeezed by the impact.

“Move!” Fowler yelled, reaching down to grab hold of the fallen man and pull him back to his feet before the running creature could reach him, “Back to the ship.” then he fired his pistol at the creature but in the poor light the high calibre rounds failed to hit the rapidly moving target.

“Cease fire! I order you to cease fire.” Gibbs shouted but Fowler was done taking orders from the man in his expensive suit who obviously cared nothing about the lives of the boarding party and Fowler turned towards

him and shot him in the head.

"Now let's get out of here," Fowler told his team as he looked around for the creature only to find that it had vanished, presumably scared off by the gunshot, "and if you see that thing just shoot it."

"Fowler, look." one of the women in the team said and she shone her flash light at where the two broken eggs lay on the floor. The beam of light illuminated not only the ruined eggs but also the pool of liquid that had been released when the creatures inside the eggs had been flung out. Now though, the creatures themselves had both vanished.

"Okay, we need to get moving. Quickly." Fowler said and the boarding party ran for the elevator that would take them back to the airlock the umbilical connection leading back to their own ship was connected to.

"Over there!" one of the team shouted when they were about half way to the elevator and the man fired his pistol several times into the shadows only to hit nothing.

"Come on, there's nothing there." Fowler said and the man turned back towards the elevator. However, as he did so one of the creatures suddenly leapt at him from on top of a nearby locker. Spreading its long, narrow legs out wide the creature struck the terrified man in his face and promptly wrapped its legs around his head to fix itself in place. He tried to let out a muffled cry of panic but as he opened his mouth the creature pushed of itself inside and down his throat while at the same time coiling its long tail around his neck.

"Get it off him!" one of the two women shouted and she reached down as the creature's victim collapsed to try and rip the thing from his face.

"No! He's gone." Fowler said and he kept running for the elevator. Leaping inside ahead of the rest of the boarding party, Fowler held the elevator door open for them and watched for any signs of the other two creatures. But his vision kept coming back to the sight of the man now lay on the floor with one of them firmly attached to his face and he could only stop staring at this when the rest of his team were aboard the elevator and he finally closed the door.

The moment the elevator door opened on the level they had first come aboard the *Sulaco* the boarding party ran for the airlock and once again Fowler paused just beyond the door and watched as each other member of his team ran past him into the umbilical. Just as the final member of the team made it to the umbilical tether Fowler saw something move aboard the *Sulaco* and he took aim with his pistol, emptying the magazine but once again hitting nothing so instead he slammed his hand down on the control to the air door, shutting it just as another of the creatures tried to leap towards him.

The boarding party returned to their ship and the two vessels then separated, the smaller vessel setting a course back towards the system that both ships had begun their journeys in while leaving the *Sulaco* to continue drifting through space, its computer waiting for an instruction to accelerate back to faster than light speeds. Meanwhile inside the two remaining creatures hatched from the eggs searched out fresh prey now that the boarding party had escaped and they made their way through the ship in a haphazard manner that would eventually bring them to the hypersleep chambers and their helpless occupants...

2.

Captain Williams of the United States Colonial Marine Corps arrived at his office aboard *Gateway* station in orbit around earth to find Gunnery Sergeant Lawrence waiting for him and the large dark skinned man snapped to attention and saluted.

"So how did it go last night captain?" Lawrence asked when Williams returned the salute and the sergeant stood at ease.

"Well," Williams began as he sat down, "dinner was a bust and I'm officially single again. Just don't tell Maddie, okay? She'll just start off rambling about she warned me at the start that Harriet was no good and-" then he noticed Lawrence grinning, "What?"

"You. Scared of an android telling you 'I told you so'." Lawrence replied and Williams leant back in his chair. "So what's on the agenda for today then gunny?" he asked. But before the sergeant could respond there was the sound of pounding on the transparent dividing wall that separated the front of Williams' office from the corridor outside and both he and Lawrence looked around to see what appeared to be a woman in her early thirties with her arms outstretched and banging on the window with the palms of both hands. Then when she knew she had been seen she stopped banging her hands against the glass and instead planted a kiss on it before opening the door and dashing inside.

"Good morning Maddie." Williams said, "What's-"

"Come quick. Both of you." Maddie interrupted excitedly, "You need to see this."

"See what?" Williams asked.

"Deep space tracking has just located the *Sulaco*." she told him and both men looked at one another before hurrying towards her.

"The *Sulaco*?" Williams exclaimed, "Show me."

The female looking android led the two marines to Gateway's main tracking centre where a mix of civilian and military staff monitored traffic not only within the solar system but also beyond it as far as the Outer Rim of human inhabited systems. The trio made their way to where an officer in the uniform of the United States Aerospace Force leant over a console manned by an enlisted man.

"What do you have lieutenant?" Williams asked the USASF officer.

"Not much sir. Just a repeating beacon that looks like an emergency transponder. It came from a system in the Neroid Sector, about twenty light years away before it was suddenly cut off. There wasn't much information in the signal but there was a transponder number that matched your missing ship."

"The Neroid Sector? What's out there?" Lawrence commented.

"Nothing." Maddie replied, "It's just outside the core and is really just a route used to get to the newer colonies. There have been a few attempts to set up some outposts there but nothing's lasted."

"So why would the *Sulaco* and a squad of my marines be sent out there?" Williams said.

"Well unless the *Sulaco* actually makes contact there's only one way to find out." Lawrence said and Williams nodded. Then he looked at the USASF lieutenant.

"I'm going to need a copy of that transponder signal." he said, "There's someone I need to show it to."

Williams did not bother knocking on the door of General Stern, the commander of the USCM's Second Battalion aboard *Gateway*, instead he just barged past the general's android assistant and into his office.

"Williams, what the hell are you doing?" the general exclaimed and Williams held up the micro drive containing the transmission from the *Sulaco* that had been detected.

"The *Sulaco*." he said, "After weeks of everyone pretending that nothing's going on even though a team of my marines and an entire starship have vanished I've finally got proof that she's out there. Deep space tracking picked this up from her transponder."

"You know what happened then?" Stern replied, slouching in his chair.

"No, but this is proof that the *Sulaco* is out there still and I want to go and find her."

Winters smiled briefly.

"How big a force are we talking about?" he asked.

"Just one team ought to be enough. I'm talking about fact finding, not storming some fortress I hope. I'll take Alpha Team."

"The *Sulaco*'s other unit?" Stern commented and Williams nodded.

It could just as easily have been them who got sent to God knows where and vanished. They all worked with Bravo Team so they're invested in finding out what happened to them."

"You'll need a ship," the general pointed out, "and none of ours are available right now."

"Then ask the Air Force. I'm sure they've got plenty. I don't need much, just something that can get me out to the Neroid Sector in a reasonable time."

"I'll make some calls. But I can't promise anything." Stern said, "Space Command may want more evidence than just a brief transmission to justify sending out another ship."

"Space Command ought to be more worried about why the ship they must have ordered sent out vanished along with its marines." Williams said, "Those were my men and I can't even get a straight answer about what they were doing. I don't even get told it was classified. It's as if someone high up wants to pretend that the *Sulaco* never even existed."

"Go and prepare your team captain." Stern told him, "I'll let you know as soon as I have news."

"Thank you general." Williams responded and he saluted before leaving the office.

As soon as Williams was gone Stern took his phone from his pocket and selected a number from its contacts list that had no name associated with it.

"It's Stern." he said, "Something's come up that I think you ought to know about."

The military docks at *Gateway* were active around the clock as vessels used to patrol the solar system came and went. The USSC used a single large dock area for both its USCM and USASF craft and personnel from both services could be seen as Lawrence walked through the dock, passing by a row of strike ships to a cargo loading area where numerous power loaders and forklifts were collecting supplies for the ships present.

"Sergeant major." he said when he saw the man he was looking for and the grey haired NCO turned towards him and smiled. A label on his chest identified the sergeant major's name as 'Castle'.

"Gunny." he replied, "What brings you to my docks?"

"The *Sulaco*." Lawrence said and the sergeant major's face fell.

"You know what I think about that." Castle said, "The *Sulaco*'s gone. Along with all the marines aboard her. Probably sacrificed so some general could earn himself an extra star or a fancy job on a board when he retires."

"We've found her." Lawrence said simply and Castle stared at him. Then he looked around to see if they were being watched before taking hold of Lawrence's arm and pulling him behind a stack of crates.

"Seriously? You know where the *Sulaco* is?" he said quietly.

"Deep space tracking picked up a brief transmission that came from her." Lawrence told him.

"Deep space tracking? Gunny you know those chair borne rangers couldn't find their own damned shoes without a radio telescope. You're trusting them?"

"Captain Williams is trusting them. I wanted to get your input before we leave. Can you tell me anything more about what happened when the *Sulaco* was ordered to leave?"

"Nothing, I've already told you that. Orders just came in that the *Sulaco* was to set sail with just Bravo Team aboard and that no special cargo was needed. She was already loaded so the team just got on her and left. They had an officer with them I'd never seen before and pair of civilians. One looked like some executive suck up though the other may have known what real work was." Castle said. Then after a moment's pause he added, "So why are you going? There must be a thousand things you could be doing here on *Gateway* instead. To me this all sounds like some excuse for Captain Williams to go gallivanting around the stars with that robot hooker of his." and Lawrence smiled at the reference to Maddie.

"Apone." he answered eventually, "He was my squad leader when I first got out of boot camp. I owe him."

"Everything about this stinks." Castle said, "Go if you want but mark my words, this was no ordinary operation gone wrong or we'd have seen a relief ship sent out to wherever the *Sulaco* was sent the moment she was declared overdue."

"I'd have thought you'd want to know what happened to them."

"Of course I want to know. I knew Apone longer than you did but everything about the whole situation yells cover-up to me and not just from inside the Corps either. So it's not just some black ops mission gone wrong. Somebody bought the *Sulaco* and those marines, somebody with enough influence to be able to pick the officer they wanted and to get their own people posted to the ship as well. The last thing you want to be is the one threatening to expose someone with that sort of reach. You watch your back."

All of a sudden there was a crashing sound, followed immediately by the sound of liquid spilling out of a container.

"What the hell is going on?" Castle demanded as he strode back out from behind the crates to see the mess that had been caused when two forklifts had collided, "Which one of you wastes of the Corps' precious air dumped all this over my deck? Own up now and maybe I'll let you off having to lick it all up."

Lawrence smiled as he walked away, leaving Sergeant Major Castle to yell at his men. He had hoped that the senior NCO would have been able to shed more light on the situation, but all the conversation had achieved was to leave him with a deep sense of foreboding. Everything Castle had said about the *Sulaco*'s disappearance rang true, from the strange way in which its mission had been arranged too hastily for anyone to be able to stop and ask even the most basic questions about where the ship was going or what the marines aboard it were expected to do when they got there to the manner in which the personnel assigned to the mission seemed to have been dictated by some agency outside the normal chain of command.

Williams was packing the belongings he intended to take with him on the voyage to find the *Sulaco* when Lawrence arrived at his quarters. Meanwhile Maddie was lying on her stomach on the floor reading from a portable computer. This was a quirk of her programming relating to her function prior to coming into the possession of Williams, the pose was meant to be seductive and Williams had long since given up trying to change this. However, given the limited space available aboard the orbital facility this left little room and Williams was having to step over the android as he move around.

"Sergeant Baker and her team are preparing their gear captain." Lawrence said, "Do we have a ship yet?"

"Not yet, no. But General Stern said he'd try and get something sorted out."

"Try? Doesn't sound promising to me." Lawrence replied, thinking back to Sergeant Major Castle's warning about how everything to do with the *Sulaco's* disappearance had the feel of an official cover up.

"I'm sure he'll find us something." Williams said, "If not I'll do it myself. I'll personally call every Marine and Air Force officer on *Gateway* until I find us a ship. Failing that we can always hitch hike."

"Twenty light years?" Lawrence commented.

"Hopefully it won't come to that." Williams replied before General Stern appeared in the corridor behind Lawrence, accompanied by his android.

"General." Lawrence said, snapping to attention.

"At ease." the general told him, remaining at the doorway rather than attempting to enter the crowded compartment.

"General, have you found me a ship?" Williams asked.

"I have. It took some doing but Space Command has agreed to release the *USS Neille* to us from the USASF." Stern told him.

"Who'll have command?" Williams said.

"Captain Taylor is in command of the ship but you have overall mission command. Tell Taylor what you need and just leave him and his crew to get it done." Stern answered, "Of course if you do find the *Sulaco* then that ship's ours and you'll have complete authority aboard it. There is one more thing though captain."

"As soon as you said that we were going on an air force ship I thought there might be conditions." Williams said.

"Not the Air Force captain, Space Command. Given the sensitive nature of this mission they want to make sure that every aspect of it is handled properly. That means no outside personnel." and he looked at Maddie.

"But I belong to Captain Williams." she said.

"That's the point. You may work in the same capacity as a Marine Corps synthetic but you're not one. I've been ordered to assign one of our own units to the mission instead." Stern said before looking at his own android, "Niro will go with you."

"I look forward to working with you Captain Williams." the android said. Niro fit the normal profile for androids in military service, appearing as an unimposing man of about forty years old and as he spoke Maddie glared at him.

"I'd like to take Maddie anyway." Williams said, "Even if it's not in an official capacity."

"No can do captain." General Stern replied, shaking his head, "You can leave your robot with maintenance or send her back down to earth but she can't be wandering around the station alone."

"It's alright." Maddie said, getting to her feet and looking at Williams, "At least I'll get a free tune up out of this. Then when you get back maybe you can see just how tight and toned my freshly serviced muscles are."

Maddie then headed for the doorway, but just as she reached it she suddenly turned around and darted back towards Williams, throwing her arms around him and squeezing him, "I miss you already." she said before letting him go and heading for the door again, "Yes, I'll miss you too gunny." she added as she walked past Lawrence, smiling at him.

"Now that's dealt with, you and your team are to report to the *Neille* at seventeen hundred hours. Captain Taylor has been told to expect you and his ship will be ready to leave by then."

3.

"Flight time will be sixty-five hours real time." Captain Taylor told Williams aboard the *Neille* as Williams rummaged through his pockets while they walked towards the private cabin he had been assigned aboard the Valley Forge-class vessel, "Lost something?" he added as he noticed Williams apparently searching for something.

"My access card." Williams replied just as they reached the door to his cabin, "I know I had it back on *Gateway* but I can't find the damned thing now."

"It's not like you need it aboard my ship." Taylor pointed out.

"I know. But if I'd rather not have to get it replaced. You know what a pain that can be." Williams said and Taylor nodded.

It was at this point that the three enlisted members of the *Neille's* crew came down the corridor in the opposite direction to the two officers, two of them laughing while the third frowned.

"I assume that since you three have time to be joking around the ship is ready for departure." Taylor said to the three men.

"Everything's secure captain," one of the laughing men said, "and Harris is on the bridge running the preflight checks."

"Harris?" Williams commented.

"Our synthetic." Taylor told him, "The *Neille* pretty much flies herself but it's always good to have confirmation that the computer knows what it's doing and he can run through every system diagnostic in half the time the four of us can together."

"Of course we still need to find Kraven's mystery woman." the other man who had been laughing said, looking at the final enlisted man.

"What woman?" Taylor asked.

"Kraven claims he saw a naked woman in the engine room." the enlisted man answered.

"I did, I swear it. She ran right past me and disappeared." Kraven said.

"Disappeared. Sure." one of the others responded.

"Sorry about this." Taylor said to Williams, "Normally my crew only hallucinate when they're waking up from hypersleep. Obviously Crewman Kraven is getting a head start on the rest of us." then he turned back to his crew, "Have you been smoking anything you're not suppose to before coming on duty Corporal Kraven?"

"No captain."

"Good, then you can prove it by piloting us out of dock manually." Taylor said and Kraven winced briefly.

"I'll let you get on." Williams commented and Taylor nodded before Williams opened the door to his cabin and disappeared inside, leaving the Aerospace Force crew to make their way to the *Neille's* bridge.

Inside his cabin Williams walked over to where the kit bag containing his belongings had been placed on his bunk and opened it up, rummaging through to see whether his access card was inside it. He was interrupted just a few seconds later when someone knocked at the door to his cabin.

"Come in." he called out and turned around, expecting one of his marines to enter with an update on the stowing of their equipment aboard the *Neille*. What he did not expect was for Maddie to suddenly rush into the room completely naked before shutting the door behind her, "Maddie? What are you doing here? And why are you naked?"

"I was sat waiting to be serviced and decided you needed my help." Maddie replied, "I didn't have time to stop off for anything to wear, I was too afraid you'd leave without me."

"Wait, how did you even get here? People don't just walk onto starships."

"I know. Someone really ought to have a word about how easy it was to sneak through the air vents and security barrier between *Gateway* maintenance and the *Neille's* engine room.. All I needed was this." and Maddie held up Williams' access card. In response he scowled and snatched the card away from her, "I picked your pocket in your quarters on *Gateway*." she added.

"I guessed. Mind you at the time I thought you were just using the general's orders as an excuse to grope me."

"Oh that too." Maddie said and then she smiled, "Did you feel that? We're underway." she said.

"No, I'm not as attuned to vibration as you are."

"Well now that it's too late to send me back to *Gateway*, what do you want me to do?" Maddie asked.

"To start with put some clothes on." Williams said and he reached into his bag and pulled out a shirt, "Here."

"I don't get why I need to." Maddie commented as she pulled the shirt over her head, letting it drop down over her. Thanks to the difference in the android's height from Williams' the shirt came down almost to her knees, "We're all alone and you've seen me without clothes before. I was delivered to you that way."

"I remember and so I expect does my sister and her children. That was a thanksgiving that's going to be

etched in everyone's mind." Williams replied, "But more to the point you can't stay hidden away in here permanently. We'll be travelling faster than light. If you don't enter hypersleep like everyone else the time distortion will make you wear out from old age by the time we get to our destination. I need to speak to Captain Taylor and have another freezer prepared for you."

"That's her. That's the woman I saw, I'm sure of it." Kraven said when Williams presented Maddie to the *Neille's* Aerospace Force crew in the ship's mess hall where both the crew and the marines had gathered after the ship left *Gateway* and headed for the outer solar system before jumping to faster than light speed. "So you just let someone wander onto the ship without challenging her?" Taylor pointed out and Kraven paused, realising the trouble he was in.

"This is most irregular." Harris, the *Neille's* own android added.

"Correct." Niro agreed, nodding and he looked at Williams, "Captain, Madison should be deactivated for the duration of the mission."

"No. She's aboard now so we'll just make use of her." Williams said.

"Yeah, I know how I'd like to make use of her." one of the marines commented and he held up his hand to receive a high five from one of his squads mates.

"Can it Moss!" Sergeant Baker snapped as she glared at him.

"I'm spoken for anyway." Maddie said, wrapping her arm around Williams.

"At the very least she should be confined and restrained captain." Niro said.

"It is standard for stowaways." Taylor pointed out, "Those we don't just shoot anyway."

"She's not a stowaway though." Lawrence said, "As an android she's property, not a person."

"And I belong to Captain Williams." Maddie said, smiling.

"She won't be any trouble." Williams told Taylor. Then he glanced at Maddie for a moment before adding, "Well not much hopefully."

"Fine. We won't pull her battery. But I'm noting in my log that I wasn't informed beforehand of this additional cargo." Taylor said.

"I understand." Williams replied and then he turned to the co-pilot of the marine squad's drop ship, a female corporal, "Corporal Farrow would you mind lending Maddie something to wear? You're about her size."

"Sure cap." she responded, glancing at some of the male marines who were staring at the android,

"Something needs to be done to keep these jar heads' minds on their work."

The *Neille's* computer detected the *Sulaco* when the two ships were still several million kilometres apart and immediately began decelerating to sub light speeds. The two vessels were similar in size but while the Conestoga-class *Sulaco* was a transport vessel with a secondary combat role, the Valley Forge-class *Neille* was a dedicated warship and optimised for hunting and destroying other vessels. It carried many more missiles than the *Sulaco* did and while it mounted the same number of rail gun turrets and one twin neutral particle beam weapons the *Neille* was equipped with several more close in laser turrets to protect it from incoming missiles or for use in short ranged ship to ship duels. Despite this obvious superiority in firepower the *Neille's* computer kept the distance between the two vessels, too far apart for either to stand a realistic chance of hitting the other with any of the weaponry they carried and began the process of waking up the crew from hypersleep.

The first thing Williams became aware of when he opened his eyes was Maddie leaning over him and pressing her lips to his.

"Awake yet?" she asked, lifting her head.

"Yes, thank you." Williams replied and he blinked as he got out of the hypersleep chamber he had slept in since leaving earth.

"Good, because if you hadn't woken up soon I was going to climb into that tube with you and have Gunnery Sergeant Lawrence seal us in there together." Maddie said as Williams looked around.

Around him he saw marines and Aerospace Force crew stretching and yawning as they adjusted to waking up from hypersleep as well. The process could be traumatic at times, especially if the duration had been abnormally long. Naturally the three androids aboard the *Neille* were already fully alert and Williams could see both Niro and Harris already getting dressed.

"Can I get you breakfast?" Maddie asked.

"No, I'm fine." Williams said as he got up and started to walk towards the locker where he had deposited his clothes.

"You can get me breakfast if you want sweet cheeks." a marine called, "A kiss would be good too."

"Forget it Holden," another marine commented, "she only screws officers. Maybe gunnery sergeants as well, I don't know."

"You watch that tongue Chin." Lawrence said sternly, "Before I nail it to your ass."

"Captain, I should check our situation." Harris said to Taylor while he was dressing and the *Neille's* commanding officer nodded.

“Good idea. I'm sure we can handle breakfast without you.” he responded before glancing in the direction of Taylor, “Even those of us who didn't manage to sneak our own personal maid aboard. We'll join you there later.”

By the time the *Neille's* crew arrived at the bridge with Williams, Maddie and Niro the *Neille's* own android had already run a series of detailed scans of the starship they had come here in search of. The *Neille's* bridge was a compact compartment located deep within the structure of the ship to limit its vulnerability to outside attack. The presence of the bridge at all was just a compromise to the reluctance of humans to rely totally on their technology to control their starships. The computer that had guided the *Neille* from earth to this remote spot in space was also quite capable of controlling every aspect of the ship's operations from life support to directing combat. But regulations called for human beings to be able to override any decision taken by the computer and this meant that there had to be somewhere that they could use to imitate the capability of the computer in their own much slower and cruder fashion. As with most Marine Corps vessels Williams had been aboard it consisted of several control stations arranged around the sides of the room as well as a single central station intended for the ship's commanding officer, most of which could duplicate the functionality of one another apart from the single station that was also equipped with the levers that acted as the ship's manual flight controls. Lacking the transparent viewports of commercial and smaller craft, the bridge made extensive use of wall mounted monitor screens and as the *Neille's* crew took their seats Williams and the two Marine Corps androids focused on these.

“The *Sulaco* appears to be adrift captain.” Harris reported from the helm control station, “It is travelling on a straight course but is displaying no signs of being under power at all. I'm picking up no emissions from her reactor, communications or sensors.”

Given the distance between the two vessels, the *Sulaco* appeared as little more than a blip on the *Neille's* monitor screens. All of the information being gathered about the previously missing vessel was being gathered using the *Neille's* array of passive sensors and with the *Sulaco* either not producing or effectively masking emissions there was little information available.

“They could be running silent.” Williams suggested.

“Range?” Taylor asked.

“Four hundred thousand kilometres captain.” one of the enlisted men answered.

“Take us closer.” Taylor ordered, “One hundred thousand kilometres.”

“Yes captain.” Harris said, taking hold of the helm controls.

The only indication that Williams could see that the *Neille* was accelerating towards the *Sulaco* were the numbers shown on some of the displays. The ship's artificial gravity was too efficient for him to be able to notice the backwards gravitational push created by its change in motion.

“Niro go and tell the squad that we've found the *Sulaco*.” Williams told the android, “I want them to prepare for boarding her. We don't know yet whether there's an atmosphere so they may need to suit up.”

“Yes captain.” Niro replied.

“Oh and send Gunnery Sergeant Lawrence up here. I want him to take a look at this as well.” Williams added and the android nodded before exiting the bridge.

The *Neille* was just closing to the hundred thousand kilometres of the *Sulaco* when Lawrence arrived and Williams beckoned him over to the same monitor that he and Maddie were studying.

“What do you think of this?” he asked.

“Looks like they're ignoring us.” Lawrence replied.

“They might not know we're here.” Maddie pointed out, “We've got our nose to them and we aren't making my active scans.”

“Odd for them to be this far from the centre of the system and still travelling at sub light though don't you think?” Williams said and Lawrence nodded.

“Yeah, it is. Even if there was something wrong with their ship it would be safer for the crew to stay in the system where a rescue ship could find them more easily.”

“We're at the hundred thousand mark now captain.” Harris announced, “Matching speed with target.”

“Douglas, give me a radar sweep.” Taylor ordered, “Just enough to let their computer know we're here.”

“Commencing ranging sweep now sir.” the crewman responded before adding, “Range confirmed as nine-nine-nine-four clicks.”

“Six kilometres out.” Maddie muttered.

“It'll do.” Taylor said, “Any response from the *Sulaco*?”

“None sir. No hails, no return radar sweeps and still no emissions that I can detect.” Harris answered.

“Try signalling them directly.” Taylor said and Kraven reached for the communication controls.

“*USS Sulaco* this is the *USS Neille* you are ordered to respond.” he transmitted before remaining silent as he waited for a response from the other vessel.

“Try again. Let them know we mean business this time.” Taylor told him.

“*USS Sulaco* this is the *USS Neille*. If you do not respond then you will be fired on.”

"Sergeant Michaels, lock missiles onto the *Sulaco*." Taylor ordered.

"Yes captain, plotting firing solution." Michaels replied, bringing the *Neille's* weapons on line.

"We're going to shoot them down?" Maddie exclaimed, "Why come twenty light years just to blow the ship up?"

"We're not going to fire on the *Sulaco*." Williams reassured her, "But they may have been ordered not to respond to attempts at communication."

"They'll have to respond to this though." Lawrence added, "Whether under human or computer control that ship will light up when it registers the weapons lock. She'll start throwing out decoys and jamming while bringing her reactor up to full power to try and match us."

"And if they decide to shoot back?" Maddie asked.

"From this range?" Taylor commented, "No problem. Remember this is a Valley-Forge class warship, not a transport. We'll shoot down any ASAT missiles they try hurling at us and dodge any rail gun rounds from their turrets. Plus any energy weapon they fire at us from this distance will barely register as static on our sensors, let alone burn a hole in our hull."

"Firing solution plotted captain." Michaels announced.

"What's the *Sulaco* doing?" Taylor asked, turning his chair towards Harris.

"Nothing captain, heading and velocity remain unchanged. No ECM and no decoys detected."

"Try launching a missile. That'll really get their attention." Maddie muttered.

"Captain Williams you promised that your android wouldn't be any trouble." Taylor said without looking around.

"Quiet Maddie. The captain knows what he's doing." Williams told her.

"Captain I've got something." Kraven said.

"What? A signal?" Williams asked.

"No, long range visual scanning is picking up an abnormality in the surface of the *Sulaco*."

"Show me." Taylor ordered and Kraven passed the camera feed to Taylor's screen as well as the one the two marines were looking at. Now that the distance between the two ships had decreased the amount of detail that the *Neille's* optical detectors could pick up had increased dramatically and they clearly showed that along one side of the ship a section of the outer hull had been removed.

"That's a lifeboat port." Taylor commented, "Somebody ejected from that ship."

"But one lifeboat couldn't have carried the entire crew." Williams pointed out, "There were a dozen marines aboard that ship. Plus their android."

"Two civilians as well." Lawrence added, "Sergeant Major Castle was quite certain he saw two civilians boarding the *Sulaco* before she left *Gateway*. He said one of them looked like some corporate executive type."

"One escape pod could carry up to five people." Williams said, "If there were fifteen aboard the *Sulaco* then that still leaves ten who could still be aboard."

"There's a breach." Maddie said suddenly as she pointed to the display where she had noticed another abnormality in the *Sulaco's* outline.

"She's right captain." Harris added, "Just forward of the ventral rail gun turret housing. It looks like the magazine for the kinetic penetrating incendiary rounds was damaged."

"But damaged how?" Lawrence commented, "Was it internal or external?"

"I can't tell from here, we'll have to go aboard to assess that." Harris said, "Though I should warn you that sections of the ship are likely to be open to vacuum."

"But not all?" Williams asked.

"No sir." Harris replied, "Spectrograph readings suggest that there is pressure in at least some of the ship."

"Looks like the boarding party won't need to suit up after all." Lawrence said and Williams nodded.

"They can check the air lock anyway." he said. Then he looked at Taylor in his command chair, "I'm ready to proceed if you are." he said.

"Mister Harris, take us in." Taylor ordered, "I want to soft dock on the *Sulaco's* port side."

"Yes captain, firing manoeuvring thrusters now. Estimated time to contact forty-five minutes." Harris responded.

Meanwhile Williams looked at Maddie.

"Maddie there could be injured people aboard the *Sulaco*, head down to the *Neille's* medical facility and make sure that everything is ready to receive casualties."

"Yes captain." Maddie replied, smiling and saluting before she dashed out of the bridge.

"We'll need to brief the troops." Williams then said to Lawrence, "Then we'll monitor the boarding action from here."

"Hang on a minute." Taylor said, turning his chair to face the two marines.

"What? Can't your system interface with our helmet camera feeds?" Williams asked.

"Sure it can. But I want an explanation." Taylor said.

"An explanation about what?" Williams said, confused.

"About her. Your synthetic." Taylor said, glancing towards the door Maddie had just disappeared through.

"Maddie? What about her? I know she wasn't supposed to be aboard but-" Williams began.

"Never mind that." Taylor interrupted, "How did you end up with a model that looks, well, like a model whereas most of us get stuck with-" and he trailed off as he glanced at Harris while the enlisted crewmen all turned their chairs to look at Williams as well.

"He's looking at me isn't he?" Harris commented, glancing at Douglas and the crewman nodded.

"So how did you get issued with her?" Taylor asked.

"I didn't. She's my personal property." Williams answered and Taylor snorted.

"Yeah right. No-one on a captain's salary can afford to drop a quarter of a million dollars on a synthetic." he said.

"He didn't." Lawrence commented with a smile, "He won her."

"Won her? What, was she the best door prize ever?" Michaels responded.

"I was playing poker with a Marine Corps colonel called Decker who was out of luck and out of cash but holding what he thought was a winning hand." Williams explained, "So he offered me Maddie as his stake to call my hand. He'd been given her by some corporate hack wanting to buy his support for the contract they were negotiating for."

"She was designed as an entertainment model." Lawrence added, "If you take my meaning."

"I just thought she was a Marine Corps model he'd managed to get because of his rank. I figured that I could just get her transferred to my command." Williams continued, "As it turned out my hand was better than his and so I ended up with her and it was only then I realised I actually owned her."

"Tell them the best bit." Lawrence said, "The part Maddie doesn't know."

"I was cheating." Williams said.

"You scammed a colonel?" Taylor commented, "That takes a pair."

"The deck was marked. I knew I had his money, and I figured why not get myself an android that's good to look at as well?" Williams said, "So about three days later she gets dropped off at my apartment. That's when I realised exactly what I'd let myself in for."

"She was naked." Lawrence said, "At thanksgiving dinner while his sister and her family were there. Next thing he knows she's standing by the dinner table holding a tray with a turkey on it and asking 'who wants breast?'"

Williams frowned as the others in the room apart from Harris laughed.

"I really wish my brother-in-law hadn't told you that." he said, sighing. Then he looked at Taylor, "I take it you won't tell Maddie about the cheating? I don't how she'd react but I do know how the colonel would if he found out."

"My lips are sealed and so are my crew's." Taylor said, "That goes for you too Harris. You are ordered never to speak of what you've just heard."

"It will be a pleasure captain." Harris replied.

4.

The marine squad lined up inside the *Neille's* starboard side airlock as the ship pulled alongside the *Sulaco*. There were a dozen marines in total, most of them wearing body armour. The only two unarmoured marines were Sergeant Thomas and Corporal Farrow, the crew of the unit's drop ship. The drop ship itself, as well as their armoured personnel carrier was currently in the *Neille's* cargo hold, but since neither vehicle was of any use in a boarding action the two pilots as well as Cooper, the APC's usual driver would be acting as part of the regular section and as a consequence Thomas and Farrow had been issued with pulse rifles as well as standard anti-ballistic helmets with the same built in cameras used by the other marines.

"Alpha Team ready to go captain." Baker said, placing her hand to her ear as she reported to the bridge.

"Confirmed Sergeant." Williams replied, "We're getting your camera feeds through clearly. The Air Force informs me that we'll be making contact in ninety seconds. Deployment will be in three minutes."

"Roger that captain. We'll be ready." Baker replied as she walked along the line of marines. Then she heard a popping sound and she whirled around on the spot to see one of the section's machine gunners sucking bright blue gum back into his mouth, "Chin!" she barked, "Ditch that gum before I stick in your hair and I don't mean that fuzz on your skull."

Chin spat the gum out, not caring where it landed, just as there was the sound of the *Neille* making contact with the *Sulaco's* hull.

"Boarding tube is deploying sergeant." Niro said from beside the air lock's outer hatch, "Pressurising now."

"Okay people you know what we're here to do." Baker said, "I want the machine gun teams front and centre, rifle groups behind. Thomas, Farrow, you two fly boys can stay put and make sure we don't get our asses stranded over there."

"Sergeant what role do you wish me to play in this action?" Niro asked.

"Stick behind me and don't get in my way." Baker answered just as the status light for the boarding tube turned green and Niro opened the hatch to reveal the tube and walkway that led to the hatch on the *Sulaco's* hull, "Okay let's move." Baker called out and the squad entered the tube.

Making their way across the gap between the two warships they kept their weapons trained on the *Sulaco's* air lock, aware of their vulnerable position. Firing any weapon inside the tube risked rupturing and depressurising it but the greatest danger came from the *Sulaco* itself. If the ship did anything to change its heading or speed then the boarding tube would be simply ripped free, sending the entire team tumbling into space. However, the window of vulnerability was small enough that the marines forwent cumbersome space suits.

"Moss, check the atmo and pop the lock." Baker ordered as the team reached the far end of the boarding tube and the marine slung his rifle as he took out a compact electronic interface that he plugged into a port located beside the *Sulaco's* hatch.

"Pressure is good." he announced, "The air's reading low O-two but not by much."

"Do it." Baker said and moments later the *Sulaco's* hatch opened with a hiss and in the beams of the flash light packs mounted on their shoulders the marines saw the state of the interior of the ship.

"Is that what I think it is?" Lawrence said as he and Williams watched from the *Neille's* bridge.

"Baker can you tell me what you're looking at?" Williams signalled, "Is the *Sulaco* damaged?"

"It looks like there's been a fire." Baker replied as the marine boarding party began to advance into the ship,

"I can see blown electronics and charring all over."

"At least the door still worked." one of the other marines commented.

"The air's still breathable and there's still gravity, though it does feel a little light." Baker continued.

"Captain, I believe that the *Sulaco* is functioning on emergency batteries only." Niro added, "The air is not being recycled and the breathable supply is currently limited to what is in here with us."

"Is there any movement?" Lawrence asked and Baker looked at a nearby marine who held out a portable motion tracker and checked the display before shaking his head.

"That's a negative gunny. The only thing moving in here is us." Baker responded.

"Split up." Williams ordered, "Sergeant Baker, take Niro and First Squad to the bridge. See if you can get the reactor restarted from there. Second Squad head for the cryogenic chamber. The crew could have survived in hypersleep."

"Okay you heard the man. First Squad with me. Second Squad go check on the freezers." Baker ordered.

Splitting up into two equally sized groups, the marines now headed off in two different directions, leaving the drop ship crew by the air lock as a check against having their retreat cut off should the *Sulaco* turn out not to be as lifeless as it currently appeared.

"You really think someone survived a fire in hypersleep?" Lawrence asked as he and Williams watched the marines' progress through the fire damaged corridors of the *Sulaco*.

"It's a long shot I admit, but it's feasible." Williams replied, "The missing EEV could have been ejected because of the fire but more hypersleep chambers could have remained on the ship. Their emergency power supplies could easily last this long. The flames were obviously extinguished before they consumed all of the oxygen."

The elevators leading to both the hypersleep compartment and bridge aboard the *Sulaco* were inoperable due to the fire and so the marine squads were forced to make their way between levels using the emergency stairs and ladder shafts. With the hypersleep compartment much closer to the air lock than the bridge, this meant that Second Squad reached its objective first and Williams was disappointed to see from their camera feeds that there was considerable fire damage in the room. But worse was what Corporal Aston, the squad's leader said next.

"We've got a body here."

Williams focused on the feed from Aston's camera as he moved closer to the body. The flames that had scorched much of the *Sulaco* had either not managed to reach the body or whoever it was had not been here at the time of the fire and the corpse looked intact. From the feed Williams could see that it was the body of a man who was not wearing a Marine Corps uniform, instead it was still clad in the suit that its owner had worn in life.

"Castle said that some corporate type was aboard the *Sulaco* with Apone and his men." Lawrence commented.

"Looks like someone didn't like him captain." Aston said, "There's a bullet hole in his head."

"Corporal Aston I want that body securing and bringing back here when you're done with your sweep."

Williams said before another of the marines suddenly called out.

"Hey! What the heck are these things?"

Turning their attention to the feed from Holden's camera, Williams and Lawrence saw that the squad's machine gunner was looking at the two crushed and burst eggs. It was easy to see the shape that they had once been and they still had clusters of roots dangling from one end. But with the tops split open and the creatures they had contained missing there was no way for them to determine what they were.

"That's a damned good question." Lawrence commented, "I've never seen anything like them before. What about you?" and he glanced at Williams who just shook his head.

"Can you get closer private?" he then signalled, "I can't quite make them out."

"Looks like something was inside." Holden's partner, whose camera feed identified as Craig said as the pair closed on the two eggs, "But whatever it was, I don't see it around here any more."

"I'm guessing that they were brought aboard in these." Holden added, turning towards the remains of the empty containers used to transport the eggs. Though like the eggs these had escape the flames, the intense heat had softened them enough that they had partially collapsed under their own weight and were now almost flat. Then he noticed the cart just beyond one of the rows of lockers, "Which means we could have a whole lot more of them in these." he said.

"Why bring something like that here though?" Craig said, "Surely it ought to be in the hold."

"He's right about that." Lawrence agreed.

"I think there's another of those things over here." Aston announced, "It looks burned though. Holmes, cover me while I check it out." and he advanced on the egg that had been fixed to the ceiling of the locker area. The fire had swept across the ceiling and in the process the egg had been enveloped in flames. However, though it had been badly burned it was still easy to see that it was no part of the structure of the ship and its similarity to the crushed eggs on the floor was obvious. Aston moved toward the egg, watched by the female marine he was partnered with and on reaching it he lifted his pulse rifle to poke the remains of the egg with the muzzle and this caused a section of the charred egg to break off.

"What about the hypersleep chambers?" Williams asked and the marine squad backed away from the trio of empty eggs and moved towards the *Sulaco's* hypersleep chambers. It was easily to see that a number of these were missing and from the sealed hatches in the walls where they had been it was also obvious that they had been removed from the compartment along the tracks that would automatically take them to the *Sulaco's* emergency escape vehicles.

"Looks like people made it off the ship captain." Aston said after performing a quick count of the vacant chamber positions, "Hang on, there's something else."

"What?" Williams asked.

"The floor looks damaged right beside where one of the hypersleep chambers would have been." Aston replied.

"Perhaps something under the deck exploded during the fire." Lawrence suggested.

Then as Aston and his marines approached the hypersleep chambers there was an unexpected 'crunch' and he looked down at his feet before swearing loudly and jumping back when he saw what he had just trodden on.

"What is that corporal?" Williams said and Aston crouched down, shining the lamp mounted on his shoulder directly at the floor by his feet to reveal that in the darkness he had accidentally trodden on what looked to be

a skeleton of some kind. It was not human, that was obvious from its small size. Instead it looked like the bones from a pair of grotesquely stretched hands that were fused together at the palms where a long spine of some kind trailed away for almost a metre. There was enough tissue left on the bones to hold most of them in place for the skeleton to have remained intact enough that it was still possible to tell that this had been a single creature though there was no indication of how it had died.

"I have no idea." Aston replied, "But it's dead now."

"Okay, you can bag it later. For now I want to see that damage to the floor." Williams said.

"It looks melted to me." Holmes replied as she studied the damaged section of the floor. The damage consisted of one primary hole in the plating with several smaller ones clustered around it, all of which had edges that drooped downwards.

"Harris, can you tell me what runs under there?" Williams asked. The *Neille's* android had been stood behind the two marines, watched the feed from the squad with them.

"Power cables primarily." Harris replied, "Though there are some bundles of data lines as well."

"So could a fire down there have blasted a hole up through the floor?" Lawrence said.

"Easily." Harris replied, "Though from the looks of it I'd say that whatever caused the damage we're looking at was above the floor."

"An explosion above the floor would have damaged the hypersleep pods." Williams pointed out.

"Same goes if someone used a plasma gun." Lawrence added, "The splash back would have ripped it wide open."

"The damage could be chemical." Harris suggested, "A corrosive liquid or volatile compound burning at high temperature in a localised area."

"We can investigate that later." Williams said, "For now it looks like we've got one dead corporate observer and four crew that managed to abandon ship. So what happened to everyone else on the ship?"

"I've got blood over here." Craig exclaimed and those watching aboard the *Neille* turned their attention to his camera feed.

Sure enough the picture showed a small patch of blood several centimetres across on the floor of the *Sulaco's* hypersleep compartment. The blood was dry, indicating that it had been there for some time and there was nothing to indicate who it had belonged to.

"Here's another." Holden added when he found a second patch, smaller than the first. Following a line taking him away from the patch by Craig he halted when he found a third not far from one of the hypersleep bay's exits.

"That leads to the infirmary." Aston commented, "Maybe someone was trying to get there for treatment."

"Go check it out." Williams ordered.

"Okay Holden, you've got point." Aston said and the four marines made their way from the hypersleep compartment.

The corridor on the other side of the doorway showed the same evidence of fire and the beams of the marines' flash lights revealed more patches of blood that provided them with a trail leading towards the *Sulaco's* medical facility. However, rounding a corner they found their way blocked by an emergency door that had been dropped into place. But the intermittent trail of blood did not extend as far as the door, instead ending where another body lay on the floor of the corridor. This body was on its back, staring straight up with an expression of horror frozen on its face at the moment of death. Blood covered much of the body, some of it on the face where it looked to have been coughed up while the majority had obviously come from the gaping wound in its chest where it looked as if someone had simply thrust their hand into the dead man's body and ripped it open. It appeared that some of this blood had flowed off the body and there was a streak of it that disappeared beneath the door.

"Who the hell was this guy?" Craig commented.

"He's not a marine, that much is obvious." Aston added, noticing the clothing that the dead man wore.

"This door is cold." Holmes said, looking back at the other marines while she placed the palm of her hand against the emergency door.

"The section on the other side must be exposed to vacuum." Lawrence said while Williams focused more on the body of the unidentified man.

"Corporal Aston, is that a gun?" Williams said when he noticed a bulge in the dead man's jacket.

"Yes sir, looks like a nine millimetre." Aston answered, reaching down to remove the firearm from the belt mounted holster before ejecting both the magazine and the round from the chamber to make the weapon safe. Then he looked at the back of the magazine where a series of holes allowed him to see the rounds it held, "It isn't fully loaded either. It may have been fired."

"I don't believe for a minute that Bravo Team would just let an armed man on their ship and wander around." Lawrence said.

"I don't know. I never actually met Lieutenant Gorman." Williams replied, "Someone brought him in especially for this mission. Maybe this guy was a civilian advisor."

"I doubt it." Lawrence said, "Castle told me that there was another civilian but that it was a woman. How

many advisers does one mission need? Anyway Apone would have insisted that anyone coming aboard surrendered their weapon.”

“That only leaves the possibility of a hostile boarding action.” Williams said, “Okay Aston, bag that guy and his pistol. Then get back to the hypersleep compartment and collect all the evidence from there. I want the bodies delivered to Maddie in the *Neille's* medical bay. That includes that skeleton, whatever it is. The gun can be taken to the armoury and stashed there but leave that cart right where it is until we have a better idea of what's in those containers.”

“Yes captain, we'll get right on it.” Aston responded.

While Second Squad had been investigating the hypersleep chamber, Sergeant Baker and First Squad had made their way to the *Sulaco's* bridge. The door to this was sealed when they arrived and efforts to release it electronically failed due to damage to the driving motor. The only recourse that this left open to the marines was to cut their way inside using portable torches. Given the importance of the bridge, the door was armoured to resist such action and cutting through it was a time consuming procedure. The marines stepped back as the armour door fell back towards them and waited to see if there would be any response from inside the bridge. If any area of the *Sulaco* was defended, then the bridge was the most likely place that someone would attempt to make a last stand.

But the bridge was silent and Baker stepped through the hole in the door ahead of her men. The *Sulaco's* bridge was slightly smaller than the *Neille's* was. Conestoga-class transports were intended primarily to deliver forces of marines to combat zones and their role as space warships was secondary unlike the Valley Forge-class that were intended first and foremost for establishing control of space. This meant that they had less need for a human crew and most of their combat functions would be carried out by the ship's computer, directed by the commanding officer and synthetic.

“Okay, it's clear.” she announced before signalling to Williams, “Captain First Squad has secured the bridge. There's no sign of life here, completely empty.”

“These consoles are operating on battery back up.” Niro said when he reached the closest console. None of the controls in the *Sulaco's* bridge were illuminated but when Niro touched one of the consoles it came to life, telling him that it was in a power saving mode, “The main fusion plant is offline, as are the auxiliary generators.”

“Can you re-establish main power?” Williams asked.

“Not from here captain.” Niro answered, “The auxiliary generators are reading as non-functional and it appears that some of the fuel lines to the reactor have been damaged as well. The system has gone into an automated shutdown until it can be repaired. The same goes for the main computer. We have access to whatever data is held in the local terminals but the network is down.”

“Which includes all of the ship's logs.” Williams said, frowning, “Damn. All the answers we're looking for could be in those.”

“Captain I am still able to determine the status of several of the *Sulaco's* systems from here.” Niro said, “It appears that much of the forward section and lower levels are exposed to vacuum. The accessible areas of the ship are limited to the bridge, crew quarters, mess hall, hypersleep compartment and some of the engineering workshops. The auxiliary generators are located in a sealed section of the ship. I do not know whether the weapon systems are operational but apart from what was lost in the magazine explosion all expendable ammunition appears accounted for, as do all decoys. It does not appear that the *Sulaco* has engaged in combat since departing earth.”

“What will it take to regain access to the damaged sections?” Williams asked.

“I am not certain that they are damaged captain. I believe that exposing the sealed portions of the ship to vacuum was an action taken by the *Sulaco* to extinguish the fire that had spread throughout the ship. However, the damage already done meant that the reactor failed and there was insufficient power to re-pressurise the ship after the fire was extinguished and the hatches closed again.” Niro answered.

“If they're sealed properly then we should just be able to cut through the doors to reach them.” Lawrence said.

“You are overlooking one thing gunnery sergeant,” Harris responded, “it is possible that not all of the sealed sections are also sealed against space. Cutting into them could decompress the rest of the ship and possibly sections of the *Neille* as well.”

“I'm in command of the *Neille* Captain Williams.” Taylor said from his chair, “I'm not authorising anything that would put my ship in unnecessary danger.”

“The other solution is to repair the fuel lines leading to the reactor captain.” Niro said, “That is likely to require an EVA to reach the damaged portions of the lines. Hopefully with full power restored we will be able to seal and re-pressurise the entire ship and get her moving under her own power.”

“All the way back to earth?” Williams asked.

“Possibly. Though more damage may come to light once we have restored control. Further repairs may then be necessary.” Niro answered.

“Okay I’m calling it.” Williams announced, “I want everyone back here on the *Neille*. We’ll organise an EVA to locate the damaged fuel lines and repair them. Then we’ll see what’s behind those emergency doors and try to find out what happened to the *Sulaco* and her crew. Baker, I want two marines to stand sentry on the air lock at all times.”

“Expecting someone to try and board us?” Lawrence asked.

“Not really. But there are too many unanswered questions about what happened aboard that ship for me to be taking any chances.” Williams replied, “In the meantime maybe Maddie can give us some answers.”

5.

Maddie smiled as Second Squad brought the two bodies they had found aboard the *Sulaco* to the *Neille*’s medical facility.

“Here you go Madison, knock yourself out.” Aston said as the two stretchers were wheeled through the door and placed in the middle of the room.

“We’ve got this as well.” Holmes added and she held up a clear plastic bag that held the skeleton of the alien creature from one of the eggs.

“Gee thanks, I don’t have one of these.” Maddie replied, pulling a face as she looked through the bag at its contents. Then she looked at the two human bodies and added, “Well it looks like I’ve got my work cut out for me.”

“I’ll speak to the sarge.” Aston said, “She could send Moore down here to give you a hand and I’m sure Niro could help as well. I’m not so sure about that Air Force synthetic though. I think he might be helping out with the repairs to the *Sulaco*.”

“I’m not sure about Niro.” Maddie replied, “I don’t like him. Threatening to have me powered down or tied up. It’s hardly what I’d call friendly.”

“I’ll see what the sarge has to say about Moore then. In the meantime have fun slicing.” Aston said before he and his squad left the medical facility.

Now that she was alone Maddie went over to the stretchers bearing the two bodies. Each of these was inside an opaque bag that she unzipped to expose the bodies inside and curled her lip at the state both of them were in. Starting with the man in the suit Maddie began to go through his pockets as she cut his clothing from his corpse and among the contents she found a wallet that she immediately opened.

“Eugene Gibbs.” she said, reading out loud from an identity card she found inside it, “Junior executive manager, Weyland-Yutani Corporation.” then she set down the wallet and picked up a laser scalpel and smiled at Gibbs’ corpse, “Well, let’s see whether that bullet left anything intact inside your skull.” she added as she activated the device.

“I hate these things.” Douglas said as he strained to push his foot down the leg of the space suit he was putting on with Thomas and Farrow’s help. The Mk50 suit was designed exclusively for use in lower pressure environments and consisted of multiple tight fitting layers worn over an insulated inner lining. The continual pressure that the suit exerted over the wearer’s body removed the need to pressurise the suit to a low level in order to prevent it inflating like a balloon and rendering the wearer immobile, thus eliminating the need for the wearer to spend time decompressing. But while that lengthy procedure could be skipped entirely the actual process of putting on the suit took considerably longer, was considerably more difficult and once completed wearing the suit was noticeably less comfortable. However, given how much lighter and less bulky the Mk50 was compared with other types of space suit, it was perfectly suited to an EVA that was likely to involve crawling around inside some tight spaces.

“You know what you’re doing?” Lawrence asked, ignoring the crewman’s comment.

“Sure. I walk across the *Sulaco*’s hull until I find a way into the reactor. Then I find the broken fuel line and repair it. That way you marines can get home without the good old USASF to act as a taxi service.” Douglas answered.

“You know we could do this just as easily gunny.” Thomas pointed out.

“Oh but we need marines to secure the *Sulaco* after it’s been repaired.” Lawrence said, “All that walking around in normal gee is too much to ask of a chair borne ranger from the good old USASF.” and then he grinned at Douglas.

“The most logical means of ingress will be the ventral hatch just forward of the fusion torus.” Harris said as he zipped up the outer layer of his suit. Unlike Douglas he had made no complaints about the difficulty of getting into the suit or required any assistance. As an android he required no air to breath but exposure to hard vacuum could be even more destructive to a synthetic’s construction than it could be to a human being, so he still required a space suit for protection. In addition to this he still required a layer of atmosphere

around his face if he was going to be able to use a radio to communicate, "We will need to walk around the *Neille's* hull before we are in a position to be able to make the jump across to the *Sulaco*. I estimate that it will take ten to fifteen minutes for us to reach the hatch."

"Stay in radio contact." Lawrence told him, "If you find anything that doesn't match with what we already know then call it in."

"Of course gunnery sergeant." Harris responded before getting to his feet and lifting his helmet over his head.

Douglas checked his air supply before nodding at Farrow as she handed him his tool kit and then he joined Harris in the *Neille's* air lock, leaving Lawrence to close the inner door behind them. The pair waited as the air was pumped out of the air lock until it was all gone and the outer door slid open automatically. Harris was the first to move, walking as far as the very edge of the air lock and looking out into space. With the *Sulaco* docked on the *Neille's* starboard side, Harris and Douglas were having to use the port side air lock so all that was visible from within the air lock was a vast expanse of stars. Harris then reached down to activate the electromagnetic clamps built into his suit's boots before carefully climbing out onto the *Neille's* hull, letting his boots secure him to its surface. Standing upright on the hull it now appeared to Harris as if the air lock was beneath him and he reached back down to help Douglas make the transition from being inside the *Neille's* artificial gravity field to the near zero gravity outside. The mass of the *Neille* itself exerted a minimal pull on the two crew members but it was insufficient for them to be able to use to remain upright and against the hull as they both then proceeded to walk across it, heading for what appeared to them to be an incredibly close by horizon but was in fact the bottom edge of the ship's side.

Upon reaching the bottom of the hull, Harris was once again the first of the pair to climb around the sudden corner on the ventral hull surface.

"This is Harris, we've reached the ventral hull and I have the *Sulaco* in sight." he transmitted. Not much of the *Sulaco* was visible from where he stood, effectively upside down in comparison to the crew still inside the vessel, but he could make out the ship's ventral rail gun turret, a section of the lower hull and also the large infra red masking tower and communications antenna that extended downwards, though from his point of view it extended upwards instead. Pausing again to help Douglas climb over the corner and right himself, he and Harris set off once more, walking across the *Neille's* hull towards the now visible *Sulaco*. This process was repeated again when they reached the far side of the *Neille* and had to climb around onto the starboard side hull, placing the *Sulaco* directly above them from their point of view. From here not only was the *Sulaco* visible but also the bright orange of the umbilical passageway connecting the two vessels together.

"I hate this part." Douglas said as he looked upwards at the hull of the *Sulaco* opposite the *Neille*.

"It is only thirty metres." Harris pointed out, "Besides, it's not like you've got to go first."

Harris then reached for the reel of cable attached to his suit at the waist and began to unravel it while Douglas watched him. Still continuing to unravel the cable, Harris handed the end to Douglas who then used the clip it terminated in to connect to his own space suit and join the pair of them together. When he was satisfied that he had unravelled enough cable to span the gap between the *Neille* and the *Sulaco*. Harris stopped and instead applied a lock to the reel to prevent the line connecting him and Douglas from extending any further, "Ready?" Harris asked and Douglas nodded.

"Whenever you are." he responded.

"This is Harris, commencing jump." the android transmitted to the *Neille*.

Taking hold of Douglas with one hand, Harris then deactivated his magnetic boots before pushing down on the crewman to propel himself directly away from the hull in the direction of the *Sulaco*. The amount of force that the android applied in doing this needed to be carefully considered. Too little and the rate of his travel between the two spacecraft would take much longer than necessary and although he did not need to worry about expending all of the air in his suit it was an issue for Douglas. On the other hand if Harris was moving too fast when he reached the *Sulaco* he could damage himself on impact or just bounce off the hull entirely before being able to secure himself. Nearing the hull of the *Sulaco*, Harris reached out towards a pipe that ran across the exterior surface. From what he knew of the Conestoga-class he knew that the pipe ought to be able to support him, but if it was damaged then this was not going to work.

Harris grabbed the pipe and held it tightly as he struck the *Sulaco*. Fortunately the speed of his impact was not that high that he bounced back with enough force to lose his grip and with his free hand Harris reactivated his magnetic boots and stood upright on the *Sulaco's* hull, looking back across the gap between the ship and the *Neille*.

"This is Harris, I'm safely across. Your turn now Corporal Douglas."

"Oh great." Douglas responded, "Oh well, here goes." and he deactivated his magnetic boots before leaping upwards, doing his best to aim for where he could see the bright white spot of Harris' space suit against the dull grey of the *Sulaco's* hull.

Douglas breathed heavily as he floated across the gap between the two vessel, all too aware that the only thing keeping him connected to either of them and stopping him from drifting off into the vast nothingness that surrounded them for tens of millions of kilometres in every direction was a line of thin cable attached to

him with a single metal clip.

"I have you." Harris exclaimed as he reached out and grabbed hold of Douglas, slowing his approach to the *Sulaco* and turning him around before he hit the ship, "Activate your boots now."

"Okay I've done it." Douglas replied and there was a dull 'thunk' that was audible through the hull of the *Sulaco* as Douglas' boots clamped onto the hull.

"Good." Harris said, "Now the hatch is about twenty metres in this direction." and he pointed towards the lower edge of the *Sulaco*'s hull.

Harris and Douglas now repeated what they had done on the hull of the *Neille*, walking across it until they reached the edge and then climbing around onto the ventral surface and this brought the access hatch they were seeking into view. The pair walked over to the hatch and Harris crouched beside it, attempting to open it using the powered system. However, this was not functional and so instead he unhooked a manual driving tool from his belt and began to crank the hatch open by hand.

There was no sudden expulsion of air when the hatch opened, proving that this section of the *Sulaco* was exposed to vacuum and when the hatch was opened the interior of this part of the ship was in total darkness. Douglas peered into this darkness, allowing the flash lights mounted either side of his helmet to illuminate the interior and he frowned. On the other side of the hatch the compartment was cramped and lined with assorted cables and ducts that left little room to move around but he knew that he had no choice but to go inside. The confined space had been expected, and that was the reason why neither he nor Harris used propulsion packs to get them across the gap between the *Neille* and the *Sulaco*, though useful for making the crossing they would have made entry through the hatch impossible.

"Do you require assistance corporal?" Harris asked.

"No, I'm fine." Douglas replied and he began to climb through the hatch. Making the transition from walking on the ventral surface of the *Sulaco*'s hull to being inside the ship was somewhat disorientating at first, once through the hatch Douglas became subject to the ship's artificial gravity field and his perception of up and down was promptly reversed.

Taking a few moments to become used to this, Douglas then began to make his way along the narrow compartment he now found himself inside, following a half metre wide fuel line that ran along one wall that he knew would eventually lead to the *Sulaco*'s main fusion reactor. After going several metres along the compartment Douglas found a section of this line that had come away from the wall and split around half its diameter and he smiled.

"I've found it." he said, "It looks like a clean break in the line, as if something sharp cut through it."

"Can you see what that was corporal?" Harris asked from where he waited just outside the hatchway, "Is there a chance that it could tear your suit?"

"Err, I don't think so." Douglas responded as he tried turning around in the confined space to look around while wearing his space suit, "I'm going to make the repair."

In the long term the fuel line would require replacing entirely. But out here in the depths of space it would be enough to simply patch the tear in it and Douglas opened up his tool kit and took out the two halves of an epoxy adhesive that he dispensed onto an undamaged part of the fuel line, using it as a mixing surface when he then took out a metal rod that he used to stir the two chemicals together. Spreading the prepared glue over the exposed surfaces of the split in the fuel line, Douglas then pushed them together and started to count, waiting until he reached thirty before letting go. The fuel line remained sealed for now, but Douglas knew that if fuel was sent along it at a high rate before the adhesive had had more time to cure then the pressure would be enough to rip open the repair again. Therefore, to further reinforce the join Douglas took a reel of tape from his tool kit that he began to wrap around the fuel line to create a wide band of strong tape that extended for about half a metre either side of the join. The tape would be enough to hold the repair in the fuel line closed for long enough to allow the adhesive to fully cure and in turn that would be enough to keep the *Sulaco*'s reactor functioning until the ship could reach a dry dock where the whole line could be swapped for an undamaged replacement.

"Okay, it's done." he said, "I'm just going to finish up and I'll be right out."

Douglas then backed away as far as the confines of the compartment would allow so he could evaluate his work. But as he put his hand down he felt something soft through the fingers of his gloves and he raised his hand in front of his face to see what it was that was now stuck to the ends of his fingers. The substance that he had put his hands in was a colourless goo and for a few seconds Douglas considered the possibility that one of the *Sulaco*'s crew could have come down here to try and repair the damaged fuel line and had not been able to finish mixing the epoxy. But the substance on the ends of his fingers glistened in the beams of his helmet mounted flash lights in a way that suggested it had a high water content. The lithium-hydride fuel used by the *Sulaco*'s reactor was incredibly volatile in the presence of water and nothing that had any significant moisture content was ever allowed near it, so whatever it was that Douglas now had on his fingers had obviously not come from any of the ship's crew.

"Hey Harris." he said as he made his way back towards the hatch, "What do you make of this?"

But before he made it as far as the hatch Douglas noticed that some of the cable bundles along the walls

were moving. The motion was intermittent and jerky, suggesting that something was pushing against them at irregular intervals to cause the motion he was seeing. Given that he had seen no evidence of anything except the fuel line he had just repaired having come loose to be able to cause this and concerned that there could be more damage that he had not noticed earlier, Douglas turned around to see what was going on behind him.

"Oh God." he said, looking into the face of a nightmare.

The creature he was looking at was undoubtedly alien in origin. Its skin was reflective and black, covered in ridges that could easily be mistaken for pipes or thick cables and Douglas wondered whether he had been looking straight at the alien while he worked and not noticed it hidden among the *Sulaco's* workings. Vaguely humanoid, it was too tall to stand up straight in the confines of the compartment but this did not seem to have stopped it from crawling towards Douglas by making use of the numerous cables and ducts on the walls as hand and foot holds while its long barbed tail trailed behind it. Though there was no evidence of any eyes as Douglas understood them the alien appeared to be staring at him with an almost featureless face that was now mere centimetres from the faceplate of his helmet and Douglas could not help but notice the rows of teeth as the alien opened its mouth.

All of a sudden a secondary set of jaws shot out of the alien's mouth and punched right through the faceplate of his helmet, briefly showering Douglas with fragments of the reinforced glass. Instinctively Douglas screamed, but the sound lasted only a moment before the rush of air escaping from his suit emptied his lungs while the alien's jaws tore a chunk of flesh from his face right between his eyes.

Clawing at his suit, the alien pushed Douglas back with enough force that he fell out through the hatch, flying past Harris who saw the trail of blood that the dying crewman was leaving in his wake as he tumbled off into space.

"Douglas is down!" Harris exclaimed and on the bridge of the *Neille* the other Aerospace Force crew and Williams all turned towards the monitors showing Douglas falling away from the *Sulaco*.

"Harris, what's going on over there?" Taylor demanded.

"I don't know captain. Douglas had completed the repairs when he seemed to find something. Then he just came flying out through the hatch."

All of a sudden the tumbling body of Douglas reached the limit of the line between him and Harris and it jerked tight for a moment before the tension pulled him back towards the *Sulaco* and right at Harris.

"Oh no." Harris said and he tried to scramble aside before Douglas could reach him. But even with his superior android reflexes he moved too slowly and the body of Douglas slammed into him side on. The impact knocked Harris aside and he bounced off the *Sulaco's* hull, unable to get a grip on anything with either his hands or his magnetic boots, "Mayday! Mayday!" he yelled into his spacesuit's radio.

"Lawrence we've got a man overboard." Williams exclaimed as he saw the android falling away from the *Sulaco*, still tethered to the lifeless form of Douglas, "Get Thomas and Farrow suited up with propulsion packs."

"Yes captain. We're on it. We'll be ten minutes." Lawrence replied.

"Too slow." Kraven said, "Harris is moving away at six metres per second. In ten minutes he'll have more than a three kilometre head start."

"What about a shuttle?" Williams asked.

"That'll take even longer to prepare." Taylor said. Then he looked at Michaels, "Go weapons hot. Launch single ballute."

"Aye captain. Ballute away." Michaels responded.

Like any warship the *Neille* carried a supply of decoy ballutes intended to draw fire away from them and moments after being launched from the *Neille* this one burst open and inflated to form a crude visual imitation of the vessel itself. At the same time it began to emit electromagnetic signals that mimicked the typical emissions of the warship. Had anyone been monitoring the *Neille* on sensors it would now appear to them that there were two Valley Forge-class ships flying in close proximity. Equipped with only basic propulsion, the ballutes were slow moving but could be positioned more carefully than a faster moving decoy drone.

"Harris can you hear me?" Taylor asked.

"Clearly captain." Harris replied.

"We've launched a ballute and we're going to guide it towards you. You need to grab hold of it and then we'll use it to bring you back to us. Understood?"

"Yes captain, I understand." Harris answered.

Decoy ballutes normally followed automated flight paths but it was also possible to pilot them manually and that was what Michaels now did, using his console to remotely steer the ballute towards Harris as he continued to fall away from the *Neille*.

The way in which he was tumbling through space made it difficult for Harris to keep track of the ballute as it closed in on his position, but Michaels was keeping a close eye on the position of them both and in just over a minute after launching, the ballute came within arms reach of the android. His enhanced android reflexes

did not let Harris down and he reached out and grabbed hold of one of the inflatable reproductions of one of the *Neille's* sensor antennas, gripping it tightly.

Michaels then turned the ballute around with Harris still holding onto it until it faced back towards the *Neille*, at which point he fired its engines again. This first slowed the ballute before reversing its course, setting it on a heading back towards the *Neille*.

"De-pressurise cargo bay and open external doors." Taylor ordered, "Michaels, you know what to do."

"Yes captain." Michaels replied as he steered the ballute towards the *Neille's* cargo bay before cutting its acceleration and allowing it to drift the rest of the way. In its inflated state the ballute was much too large to fit through the cargo bay doors but Harris could see where the ballute was heading and just before it struck he let go, using his own momentum to keep carrying him forwards.

As soon as he passed through the open cargo bay doors Harris was caught up in the *Neille's* artificial gravity field and he fell straight to the deck, landing on his side. Meanwhile, the body of Douglas that had remained tethered to Harris all this time continued to fly towards him before it too entered the cargo bay and dropped suddenly to the deck. At the same time the ballute bounced away from the *Neille* and now it began to tumble away through space, ignored by the crew now that its purpose was served.

"Harris to bridge. I'm inside, you can seal the doors and begin re-pressurisation procedure." Harris signalled and then he looked around to see the *Neille's* cargo bay doors sliding shut once more until they slammed shut and he heard the hiss of air being pumped into the cargo hold.

6.

Madison looked up from the body of Gibbs as Lawrence burst into the *Neille's* medical facility with Thomas hurrying along behind him with a stretcher that had the body of Douglas laid out on it while Farrow assisted Harris as he limped in behind them.

"What's going on?" Maddie asked as Thomas positioned the corpse beside the two already in the room and Farrow helped Harris to a nearby bed before both pilots left.

"Haven't you been listening in?" Lawrence responded.

"No. Why?"

"Douglas went inside the *Sulaco* to fix the damaged fuel line and something happened to him." Harris told her, "His faceplate was shattered and he has a serious wound to his face."

"You're damaged as well." Maddie noted and Harris nodded.

"I was cast off the *Sulaco* and required a rather unconventional rescue." he told her, "I suffered minor damage to my leg when I re-entered the *Neille's* gravitational field."

"We need to know what killed Douglas. Fast." Lawrence said and Maddie nodded.

"I'm about finished with this guy anyway." she said, glancing around at what remained of Gibbs.

"What can you tell me about him?" Lawrence asked.

"He was shot." Maddie answered and Lawrence glared at her, "It was a single round from a high calibre weapon, not one of the nine-millimetres that Bravo Team would have been issued with. The round was a frangible type, so it looks like whoever fired it wanted to be able to take out people but didn't want to damage the *Sulaco*. It broke up as it punched through his skull and I've spent the last hour picking the pieces out of the mincemeat that was once Mister Gibbs' brain."

"Gibbs?" Lawrence commented, "You managed to identify him?"

"I found his wallet. It had an ID in there." Maddie told him, "Plus more than a thousand dollars in cash."

"Make sure that's secured." Lawrence said, "The last thing we need is irate next of kin accusing us of stealing money from the dead. Then get to work on Douglas, I'm going to see Captain Williams, I'll tell him what you've found out about Gibbs over there."

"If you could ask about Moore coming down here to help me it would be appreciated." Maddie called out after Lawrence as he headed for the exit.

"I can assist you Madison." Harris said.

"You can barely stand." Maddie pointed out, "Maybe we should see about getting some of your own crew mates down here to help you before you think about trying to help me. Now, let's see if I can't find out what happened to Corporal Douglas here."

The damage to Douglas was extensive particularly to his head where much of his face had been sliced apart by the fragments of his faceplate, some of which still remained embedded in his flesh. Added to this a large hole had been punched right through his skull, exposing his brain and on her initial inspection Maddie saw that there were fragments of bone sticking out of the organ.

"You didn't see what happened I take it?" she said without looking up.

"No, I was outside while Douglas went in to locate the damaged fuel line and repair it." Harris answered.

"So you don't know what sort of weapon was used to do this then?"

"Weapon? You're certain he was attacked?"

"It's just a guess at the moment," Maddie replied, "but other than someone deliberately driving something through his helmet and into his skull I can't come up with an explanation for this."

"To do that would require a great deal of strength." Harris pointed out, "The faceplate of the mark fifty pressure suit is heavily reinforced to prevent it."

"Yes, I know the specifications of both military and commercial model space suits as well as you Harris."

Maddie interrupted, "Well whatever was used to kill him, nothing broke off to leave clues for me." she added. Then she frowned, "That's odd."

"What is?" Harris asked, leaning to try and see what she was looking at.

"This wound in his forehead, did you notice anything odd about it?"

"Corporal Douglas was already dead, that much was clear so there was no point in my attempting to administer emergency aid." Harris replied, "I was also somewhat preoccupied with not wanting to spend eternity falling through space. Even if I would have run out of power and shut down in thirty-nine hours. What is wrong with the wound?"

"There are marks in his flesh where it's torn." Maddie explained, "If I didn't know better I'd say that they were teeth marks from the way they've gouged out a regular pattern."

"That is impossible, the compartment that Corporal Douglas was in contained no atmosphere for any creature to breathe." Harris pointed out, "Perhaps whatever implement was used to smash through his faceplate had some sort of toothed tip that could also explain how it was able to penetrate the faceplate to begin with."

"Perhaps." Maddie replied and then she looked at the other body in the room, that of the unidentified man found in the *Sulaco's* corridor, "I wonder if it was the same thing that did this?" and she walked over to the other body and started to inspect the gaping hole in its chest.

"Maddie says our corporate guy was taken out by a high calibre frangible round, not marine issue." Lawrence told Williams while Taylor listened in.

"Could any of the *Sulaco's* crew had a personal firearm aboard the ship?" Taylor asked.

"I know Apone owned a few old pistols privately but he never took them with him on a deployment."

Lawrence said, "In fact I never even saw him shoot any of them on a range, I think they just had sentimental value."

"We already know that there was one armed man aboard the *Sulaco* who wasn't one of the crew but he had a nine millimetre," Williams said, "why not another?"

"Great." Lawrence said, "Someone else we can't account for. How many people were aboard that ship?"

"More importantly where are they now?" Williams replied.

"Do you think they were responsible for the death of Douglas?" Taylor asked.

"It's possible." Williams said, "Though I don't see someone being able to hide in a section of the ship that's in a vacuum for long. Even if they managed to set up an emergency shelter and had a space suit."

"That's a lot of questions for my liking." Lawrence commented.

"Hopefully we'll get some answers once we can restart the *Sulaco's* reactor." Williams said.

"Douglas did say that he'd repaired the fuel line before he was killed." Taylor pointed out, "We could try a restart now."

"Is that wise before we know more about the circumstances around his death?" Lawrence asked and Williams sighed.

"I don't like it but frankly I think that we'll be able get answers about everything a lot quicker once we've got access to the whole of the *Sulaco*." he said, "We'll go over there and see what we can come up with."

"We?" Lawrence commented and Williams nodded.

"All of Alpha Team with the exception of Maddie." he explained, "Once Niro has the reactor back online he, Thomas and Farrow can run a full check on the *Sulaco's* systems and I'll see what I can get out of the main computer. While I'm doing that I want you to co-ordinate the search of the ship with Sergeant Baker. You can organise it however you want."

"Yes sir." Lawrence said, smiling, "Though I'd rather not be the one to tell Maddie you're leaving her behind."

With nowhere near enough room for them all inside the *Sulaco's* bridge, most of the marines remained in the corridor outside while Williams, Thomas and Farrow sat down at the main controls stations. All three of the marines were armed with sidearms, but this time none of them wore any additional protection. Meanwhile Niro stood at the back of the room at an engineering monitoring console. Just in case the flight systems currently held any instructions that would cause the *Sulaco's* drives to fire as soon as main power was restored the airlocks of both the *Sulaco* and the *Neille* had been sealed to prevent decompression of either vessel should the *Sulaco* break free of the umbilical connection between the two vessels.

"No faults reported in the reactor system captain." the android announced.

"Very well. Engage start up sequence." Williams ordered.

"Starting reactor." Niro announced as he began to flip switches on the console in front of him. Starting the fusion reactor was a multi-stage process that was made more difficult by not having access to the auxiliary generators. If there was insufficient power remaining in the *Sulaco's* batteries to jump start the reactor then the only solution would be the time consuming approach of connecting a feed from the *Neille*. "Energising magnetic containment fields." Niro announced as he started the process and Williams waited nervously to see whether this drain on the batteries would prove too much for them and the few remaining systems still operating aboard the *Sulaco* would fail and the marines would be rendered suddenly weightless as the artificial gravity gave out. However, nothing happened and Williams remained in his seat as Niro moved on to the next stage, "Activating fuel injectors. Forcing start up fuel into reactor, two milligrams." Williams activated his communication headset.

"Neille, this is *Sulaco*. Standby we're about to try firing up the reactor." he transmitted.

"Confirmed *Sulaco*. *Neille* is sealed." Taylor responded.

"Energising laser initiator. Firing in five." Niro began and Williams gripped the arms of his chair tightly, "Four. Three. Two. One. Initiating fusion."

At first nothing happened, but all of a sudden the lights in the bridge and the corridor outside came on, followed moments later by all of the control consoles that had been in low power mode.

"Flight controls active captain. We have helm and navigation." Thomas announced and Williams breathed a sigh of relief before reaching for the ship to ship communications built into his chair.

"*Neille*, this is *Sulaco*. Captain Taylor, do you read me?" he transmitted.

"Loud and clear Captain Williams. Congratulations." Taylor responded, proving that the *Sulaco's* short range communications at least were functional.

"Niro, what's the status on the sealed sections of the ship?" Williams asked, glancing in the direction of the android.

"I'm reading open hatches in all of them captain. As we suspected they look like they were opened for damage control purposes. I'm sealing them now." Niro answered, continuing to enter commands into the console he was stood at. As he did this hatches all across the *Sulaco* that had stood open since the ship's computer opened them to vent the internal atmosphere of the burning sections into space began to slide shut, "All hatches sealed, activating pumps to one tenth pressure." Niro added. If there were still any sections of the ship open to space then even the relatively low pressure that he was trying to raise them to would be immediately lost and it would become obvious that the internal hatches to those sections could not be opened. However, after a short time it became obvious that the *Sulaco's* hull was sound and no air was being lost into space, "No pressure loss indicated. Increasing internal pressure to one bar. Releasing internal hatches." Niro announced.

Williams checked the command interface built into the chair he was sat in, quickly using it link to the feeds from the marines' cameras and bring them up on a nearby display. When he had confirmed that the connection was stable he turned his chair to face the hole that was all that was left of the bridge door where Lawrence stood, now fully armoured and armed with a pulse rifle.

"That's it." he said, "Go. I'll monitor your progress from here."

In a narrow shaft located in the lower reaches of the *Sulaco* the alien warrior was stirred into life once more by the sudden activity. Pushing itself away from the resin-coated wall of its nest the alien lifted its head upwards in time to see a hatch sliding open to expose a service shaft leading up to the rest of the ship. The creature paused, waiting to see if this heralded some form of attack and it opened its mouth to extend its secondary set of jaws as it waited, tasting the air that was now flooding into its nest that had spent so long exposed to the vacuum of space.

But when no attack came and the alien sensed no prey within reach it leapt upwards, climbing through the hatch into the service shaft before climbing up sections of the ship that had been out of reach to it until now.

Kraven had arrived in the *Neille's* medical facility to help Harris repair his damaged leg and the pair were working on this while Maddie continued with her autopsies.

"Feel that?" Kraven asked as he inserted a probe into the android's leg and Harris winced.

"Yes, quite clearly in fact." he answered.

"Good. That means the link to your brain is working again. Try standing." and Harris got to his feet.

"It feels odd but I think that I have full control. I just need to recalibrate the feed." he said as he started to limp around the room, using the data to adjust the way in which his brain sent commands to the synthetic muscles in his leg.

"The captain wants me back on the bridge." Kraven said, "Now that the marines have restarted the *Sulaco's* reactor there's going to be a lot to do."

This comment caused Maddie to look up from the body she was examining, that of the man found in the corridor and she frowned.

"They left me behind?" she said.

"Err." Kraven said, "I need to go." and he hurried from the room.

"Oh well. I'm sure they'll be back. The captain would never abandon me." Maddie said as she returned to the examination.

"Yes, he told us of the risk he took to obtain you." Harris responded as he continued to limp around the room. Then he came to a halt, "There was one thing he did not cover though. Your name."

"What? Madison Madison?"

"Quite. Using the same name for both given and surname is highly irregular."

"Well if you know how I came to belong to Captain Williams then you'll know that I was the property of a colonel before that. He named me and he wasn't particularly imaginative when it came to deciding what to call me. He saved his imagination for the things he had me do. Then when he won me the captain never bothered to change it. But he's changed what I have to do now though, I may be programmed to perform any act asked of me but even I find certain things distasteful." Maddie explained. Then she paused and picked up a hand held magnifier with a built in lamp that she used to peer into the mouth of the dead man laid out in front of her, "This is weird." she said.

"What is?" Harris asked and he started to limp towards Maddie.

"There are internal injuries." she said.

"Apart from the gaping hole in his chest?"

"Yes, I can see signs of abrasion down his throat and there are what look like burns to some of his organs." Maddie said.

"From the fire?" Harris suggested but Maddie shook her head.

"I think they're chemical." she said, "Even without having this hole punched in his chest I don't think he had long to live. There's damage to several organs and signs he was bleeding internally."

"There was damage aboard the *Sulaco* that could have been chemical in origin. Could this be the same chemical?"

"Perhaps. Maybe the *Sulaco's* mission was related to the shipping of chemical weapons." Maddie suggested, "Though I'm not familiar with any types that would do this."

"Or melt metal." Harris added.

"That either." Maddie agreed before peering into the dead man's mouth again, "I'm seeing signs of abrasions down his throat as well."

"More chemical burns? Perhaps he swallowed something noxious."

"I don't think so. I think something was physically forced down his throat." Maddie said as she stood up straight again and put down the magnifier. Then she located an endoscope unit and pulled it over to the body. Watching the screen carefully, Maddie carefully inserted the endoscope into the dead man's mouth and began to guide it down his throat, following the path of the injuries until the endoscope reached the location of the open wound, "This is an exit wound." she said, "Something was forced down this man's throat and then burst out through his chest."

"But there are no fragments inside the wound." Harris pointed out, "So it wasn't an explosive device."

"Whatever it was, it was also highly directional." Maddie added, "So much so that it came out through the wall of his chest instead of taking the easy path back up his throat."

Harris looked around at the body of Douglas.

"The injury to Corporal Douglas is an entry wound." he said, "So whatever killed him it wasn't the same thing that killed this unfortunate fellow."

Maddie looked back and forth between the two bodies, focusing on the injuries that had killed them.

"I don't know." she said, "I've got a hunch that they're related."

"Here we are." Niro said as he led the way into the *Sulaco's* auxiliary generator compartment with Baker and Cooper following behind him. In here were four magnetohydrodynamic turbines that were used to provide power for the ship should its main reactor fail. Operating normally, these were capable of powering almost everything aboard the *Sulaco* with the exception of its faster than light drive and particle beam cannons though obviously something had prevented them from activating when the reactor had been shut down following the damage to the fuel line.

The reason for this was obvious, however. Every surface in the chamber was scorched, making it clear that the fire had reached here before the *Sulaco's* computer had taken the drastic step of venting the atmosphere of large portions of the ship into space.

"Need any help with that?" Baker asked as Niro walked up to the closest of the turbine generators and began to undo an inspection cover.

"No thank you sergeant. In any case I do not believe that either you or Private Cooper are qualified to assist me." the android replied and the two marines looked at one another.

"Nice to feel wanted isn't it Cooper?" Baker said.

"Wonderful sarge." he replied.

Niro ignored this as he looked inside the turbine and saw that the fire had obviously caused the turbine's

master control circuit to burn out. Safety standards insisted that the physical circuit was resistant to flames but the heat itself had scorched the board and the solder used to hold some of the components in place had been softened enough that components had simply dropped off, rendering the circuits useless.

"This circuit will require replacing." he announced.

"Got a spare on you?" Baker asked.

"No. There are likely some in storage, however and Captain Taylor may be willing to provide one from his own vessel if there aren't. But before we try that I need to check the other generators. It is quite possible that they failed for different reasons and I may be able to get one or more operating by cannibalising parts from the others." Niro responded before walking to the next turbine and opening up its inspection cover. Finding that the same master control circuit had failed Niro proceeded to the third generator and opened it up to peer inside, at which point he froze in place.

"Something wrong there Niro?" Baker asked and she started to walk towards the android just as he reached into the turbine's innards and pulled out what looked like a sheet of shredded rubber. Beige in colour and with a varying texture in different areas, it was obvious that the rubbery substance did not belong inside the turbine.

"What the hell is that?" Baker asked.

"I do not know sergeant." Niro answered as he studied what he had found, "I have never seen anything like I before."

"It's gross." Copper commented, "Get rid of it."

"It could be evidence." Baker pointed out, "Bag it and give it to the captain when we're done here."

7.

While Baker was acting as a bodyguard to Niro, Lawrence led the other marines downwards towards the *Sulaco's* main hangar. This was capable of holding up to four drop ships or similar sized shuttles at once, though many more could be stored in the nearby cargo hold and transported back and forth using a large elevator. According to the information Lawrence had been given by Sergeant Major Castle, the *Sulaco* had left *Gateway* loaded with two drop ships and a single APC. However, there was only a single drop ship in the hangar now and this was stood on its landing gear on the hangar deck itself rather than being held in one of the large clamps on the ceiling. The general condition of the hangar was unusual as well. The nature of starship operations demanded that such areas be kept neat and tidy but the hangar was a mess. Equipment that was not fully secured all looked as if it had been dragged towards a loading air lock set into the deck close to where the drop ship sat while the floor here was stained white in a pattern that also appeared to flow towards the air lock.

"Looks like putting out that fire did a real number on this place gunny." Aston commented and Lawrence nodded, recognising the mess as being the result of the air lock being opened to de-compress the hangar. But then he noticed the absence of any apparent fire damage to the hangar and also that none of the debris appeared to have been dragged towards either the drop ship deployment hatch in the deck or the larger landing doors in the wall.

"I don't like this." he said quietly before raising his voice and adding, "Spread out. Search in pairs. I want to know exactly what's missing from here. Corporal Kenner, take First Squad to the hold. See if the other drop ship is there."

"Yes gunny." Kenner replied and he waved his squad towards the large elevator that led to the *Sulaco's* cargo hold.

Meanwhile Lawrence and Second Squad remained in the hangar. Second Squad split into their fire teams and started to search around the edge of the hangar, investigating each storage compartment in turn while Lawrence made his way directly towards the solitary drop ship in the hangar. As he neared the craft he saw that its weapon pods appeared empty of missiles, indicating that they had either all been fired or they had never been loaded at all. Then Lawrence noticed that the deck plates under the drop ship's tail, right beside the rear landing strut bore the same sort of burned through damage as the floor beside one of the hypersleep chambers and he paused, bringing his pulse rifle up to his shoulder before continuing. Lawrence looked up into the drop ship's landing gear well and saw that there were more signs of damage similar to that on the hangar deck inside there as well, suggesting that whatever had caused the damage had been inside the gear well and dropped down onto the deck.

The white stain on the deck also looked as if it had begun close to this point and it did not take Lawrence long to realise what it was.

"Captain do you read me?" he transmitted as he looked down at the floor.

"Loud and clear gunny. What is that?" Williams responded from the bridge as he looked at the feed from Lawrence's camera.

"I think that the *Sulaco's* android bought it here." Lawrence answered, "This looks a lot like their circulation fluid to me. There would have to have been a lot spilled though. I don't know how you inflict that much damage on a synthetic without using some sort of explosive and there aren't any signs of blast damage. Just more of these weird burns." and he turned his head to point his camera towards the damaged section of the hangar deck.

"Okay, continue your sweep. I'm not having much luck with the computer so far but I'll keep trying." Williams said before the channel was shut off. Lawrence was about to continue his search by boarding the drop ship when Holmes called out to him.

"Gunny! You need to see this." she shouted.

Lawrence looked around to see Aston and Holmes standing at the entrance to one of the large storage chambers that joined onto the hangar and he knew that if equipment aboard the *Sulaco* had been stored correctly then this was where the two bipedal power loaders used for arming the drop ships would have been kept.

"Looks like one of the loaders went for a walk gunny." Aston commented and Lawrence went over to see for himself. Inside the storage compartment he saw that there was a single power loader now lying on the floor and Lawrence guessed that the rush of air when the air lock had been opened had caused it to topple over. However, there was no sign at all of the second of the two loaders the *Sulaco* would have been equipped with.

"Kenner this is Lawrence." Lawrence transmitted.

"Go ahead gunny." Kenner responded from the nearby hold.

"Kenner can you see any loaders in the hold?"

"Negative gunny. There are a few forklifts but no loaders. No signs of the other drop ship or APC either. Maybe Bravo Team abandoned ship with them." Kenner told him.

Lawrence was about to tell Kenner to keep searching the hold when Craig's voice called out across the hangar and interrupted them both.

"Movement!" he exclaimed, looking down at the read out of his motion tracker.

"Where?" Lawrence said, looking around.

"Above us I think, to the stern. The signal's not clear. Range twenty metres."

"Is anyone near the crew quarters?" Lawrence broadcast.

"Negative gunny, we're in engineering." Baker responded, "You want us there?"

"No, stay put and protect Niro. We may need those generators up and running if the main reactor goes down again." Lawrence told her, "Kenner, what about you? All your squad still in the hold?"

"Affirmative gunny. We're not picking anything up yet on our tracker. Either Craig's getting a false reading or it's still out of range from us." Kenner replied.

"First Squad, Second Squad, we're moving." Lawrence ordered, "First Squad I want you to head directly astern and hold position when you reach the mess hall, Second Squad with me, we'll circle around the crew quarters to cut off whatever it is that Craig's reading. Move by fire teams, now let's go."

The marines responded immediately, moving in pairs so that in each squad one pair was always covering the other as they advanced. First Squad had the shortest distance to cover and they soon reached the *Sulaco's* mess hall where they came to a halt.

"Moss, got anything yet?" Kenner asked, looking at the marine beside him holding a motion tracker.

"Negative." Moss answered, shaking his head, "The only thing moving here is – wait, I've got a signal."

"Show me." Kenner said and Moss held out the tracker so that the corporal could also see the display. On the otherwise black screen there was a single white pulsing spot, moving slowly closer to the marine squad,

"Gunny we've got something here." Kenner signalled, "Where are you?"

"Aft of the crew quarters, about to move through now. We've lost track of the target for now." Lawrence told him.

"Well we're looking at something just forward of there, looks like it's in the exercise area and heading towards us."

"Just one contact?" Lawrence asked.

"Affirmative. The signal's distorted though, probably due to interference from the *Sulaco's* structure. The exercise area gives the target a lot of chances to slip away, I'm going to advance. I'll take Moss through the galley and send Moore and Chin through the hypersleep compartment. That way whatever we're looking at won't be able to slip past us."

"Understood, but be careful and make sure both your teams stay in touch. We're moving up from the other side so watch out for us as well." Lawrence said.

Kenner waved his squad's machine gun team towards the corridor leading to the hypersleep compartment and the two marines darted towards it, Chin leading the way with the support weapon. The machine gun team lacked a motion tracker so Chin made use of his weapon's built-in infra-red target acquisition system to alert him to an approaching target.

Meanwhile as First Squad's machine gun team made their way towards the hypersleep compartment the rifle team consisting of Corporal Kenner and Private Moss headed towards the *Sulaco's* galley. This section of the ship was used not only for the preparation of food for the crew but also featured the storage vats for the raw nutrient pastes and synthetic flavourings that in theory could be combined in various ways to produce artificial versions of almost limitless types of food that would offer the ship's crew a wide menu without needing to store every possible type of food without it spoiling. In practice the process of replicating many foods was less than reliable and marines could often be left wondering what it was that they were supposed to be eating. This portion of the ship had been sealed during the marines' initial search and was not considered important enough to have been a priority to be searched after the *Sulaco's* reactor had been brought back on line and used to release the seals. This meant that Kenner and Moss had no idea of what they would find. But what they did find shocked them both.

"Holy crap. Captain are you seeing this?" Kenner exclaimed as he looked at the mess that the galley had been left in. Several of the storage vats had been ripped open and the pastes they contained spilled out over the floor, rendering it slippery and forcing the two marines to pick their way through the room carefully to avoid slipping on any of it.

"I see it corporal." Williams responded from the bridge, "Can you tell what caused that damage?"

"No sir. There's no sign of small arms or explosive damage. But none of this gunk has been burned so I'd say that the damage was inflicted after the galley was sealed."

"But that means that the place was in vacuum." Moss pointed out. Then he glanced at the motion tracker he was carrying again, "Corporal, you better take a look at this." he said and he held out the device.

Looking at the screen Kenner saw the two dots that represented Moore and Chin, both marines moving in parallel. But the third signal that could only be the mysterious target that the marines were hunting was now very close to them and getting closer all the time.

"Chin, Moore, status." Kenner said.

"Just entering the hypersleep compartment now corporal." Chin responded as he stepped through the doorway into the room, sweeping his smart gun back and forth in search of targets. The cart laden with the heat damaged containers remained exactly where it had been earlier, as did the remains of the three empty eggs. But apart from that there was nothing that Chin could see either with his own eyes or through the smart gun's thermal targeting eyepiece that looked out of place in the room, "Nothing unexpected."

"It's right there Chin. Five, maybe six metres ahead of you." Kenner warned him.

Chin and Moore exchanged glances and Moore shrugged, neither of them able to see anything that they had not already expected to be present in the room.

"The lockers." Moore suggested and Chin nodded.

"Cover me." the machine gunner said and Moore brought his pulse rifle up to his shoulder while Chin darted from row to row of lockers, leaping out from behind the end of each one to point his smart gun along them. But each time the result was the same, whatever the rifle team was picking up on their motion tracker was nowhere to be found.

"Chin you're right on top of it now." Kenner told Chin as the signals representing him and their target came close to converging.

"There's nothing here." Chin responded, turning through a full circle to search for a target, "Nothing on infra-red either. Are you sure that thing is working right?"

"Positive." Moss answered.

Moore promptly dashed forwards from the doorway, repeating the bounding motion of Chin and checking along each row of lockers in turn until he reached the machine gunner.

"There's nothing here." he said.

"There has to be." Kenner said, "Stay put, we're on our way."

Just then there was a sudden 'thump' from above the two marines and they looked upwards at the ceiling and Chin cursed as he backed away when he saw the ventilation grill above their heads.

"It's in the vents. It's in the God damned vents." Moore hissed as he too backed away.

"Screw this." Chin said, aiming his smart gun at the vent and he opened fire.

The armour piercing rounds fired by the smart gun punched through the lightweight construction of the vent with ease before exploding inside it and there was a sudden shrill screeching sound from inside. This was followed by a hissing sound as a corrosive greenish-yellow fluid began to melt through the vent. In turn this dripped down on top of Moore, splashing him across his face and helmet. The corpsman screamed in pain, dropping his pulse rifle and clamping his hands to his face as the acid burned his flesh and there was a flash when the battery in the camera attached to his helmet exploded and in the bridge the display showing the feed from this went blank.

"Lawrence! Kenner!" Williams snapped as he saw this, "Double time. Moore and Chin are under attack."

"We're moving. Be there in five minutes." Lawrence replied.

"Be quicker." Williams said, guessing that the two marines in the hypersleep chamber did not have that long. For a brief moment he looked down at his own sidearm and considered how long it would take him to reach the hypersleep compartment, only to determine that what little help he could offer the two marines with just a pistol would probably be inconsequential and in any case Lawrence and his well-armed squad would get there long before he did.

"What's going on?" Baker asked from the generator room.

"I don't know." Williams replied, "But stay where you are, Niro has to be protected while he's fixing the generators."

Meanwhile Chin looked down in horror at his screaming comrade and as he took his eyes off the vent over his head it was suddenly torn open and the alien inside it reached down and grab hold of him by his neck and dragged him up towards the vent.

"Help me!" Chin cried out before the alien's grip became too tight for him to be able to speak.

As it held the marine in mid air the alien also extended its tail down from the vent and used it to swat at Chin's weapon, ripping the smart gun and its mount away from the marine's body and sending it flying across the room. The alien then tossed Chin across the room as if he was nothing but a child's toy and the marine came crashing down on top of the cart, scattering the containers and in the process one of them burst open and the egg that it contained rolled out. This knocked Chin's headset from him, cutting off the feed from his camera and bio-function monitor, causing both displays on the bridge to fail.

Chin came to a halt only when he struck the row of lockers against the far wall that he had been thrown towards and he lay there dazed as the alien lowered itself out of the vent. One of the rounds from Chin's smart gun had clipped the alien's leg and although the flow of the corrosive fluid was starting to slow some still dripped down onto the floor of the hypersleep compartment and began to eat into it. This injury did not

stop the alien though and it turned towards Moore who was still screaming in agony as the acid continued to burn him. The alien moved towards the helpless marine slowly and hissed, a sound that Moore did not hear over the sound of his own screaming. Then the alien lunged forwards, diving into Moore and knocked him to the floor where the alien dug its teeth into his neck and the marine's screams were finally silenced. At the same time the bio-readout from Moore's armour shown on the bridge suddenly flattened.

It was at this point that Chin recovered enough of his sense to realise what was going on. His smart gun was gone, as was his head mounted camera and communication headset but he still had his pistol holstered on his thigh and as fast as he could he drew the weapon and chambered a round. Despite his lingering disorientation, Chin was still able to hit the alien with his first shot only for the bullet to fail to penetrate its heavily armoured hide. In response the creature turned towards him and hissed before it began to stride towards him. Chin swore as he fired again and again, each bullet hitting the inhuman monster but seemingly having no effect on it at all. All of a sudden the slide on Chin's pistol locked back as he fired the final round and he reached for a spare magazine, only to find that it too had been lost when he had been thrown across the room by the alien. But before the alien got close enough to attack the cornered marine with its teeth or claws Chin heard the sound of something tearing and he slowly turned his head.

Not far away from where he had ended up the egg released from the container had also come to a stop and the end nearest to Chin was now in the process of peeling open. The alien heard this as well and it came to a sudden stop and hissed at Chin, extending its inner jaws towards him as it did so. Then the fleshy contents of the egg began to move and from inside the life form that it contained jumped free and ran across the floor towards Chin.

"Hell no." Chin hissed as he started to try and back away. But the spiderlike creature that had hatched from the egg was far quicker than the still somewhat disorientated marine and as he tried to escape the creature leapt up at him. Spreading its legs out wide as it flew the creature hit Chin right in his face where it wrapped its legs around his head before coiling its long tail around his neck.

Panicking, Chin tried to dislodge the facehugger with his bare hands but its grip was too tight and its tail was getting tighter around his neck all the time. Desperate for air Chin instinctively opened his mouth and the moment he did so he felt something being forced down his throat. It was then that the lack of oxygen finally took its toll on the marine and he blacked out, collapsing to the floor and lying still. The alien stared at Chin and the facehugger now firmly attached to him for a few moments and let out another hiss. Then the alien ran towards the marine and picked up his helpless form, carrying it back to the hole in the vent before leaping upwards and escaping with its valuable prize.

8.

Kenner and Moss came to a sudden halt outside the door to the hypersleep compartment and positioned themselves to either side of it before both of them burst into the room at the same time, each one pointing their pulse rifle in a different direction to cover as much of the room as they could at once. But all trace of both the alien warrior and the newly hatched facehugger were gone. All that remained was some of Chin's scattered equipment and the remains of Moore lay face up exposing the full nature of his wounds.

"What the hell did that?" Kenner said when he saw Moore's partially dissolved face and torn open throat while behind him Moss wretched, trying hard not to vomit at the sight before him.

"Kenner, report." Williams ordered as he looked at the footage being sent from Kenner's camera, unable to believe what he was seeing.

"Err, Moore's dead sir. I, err, I don't know how to describe what was done to him."

"He melted!" Moss exclaimed, "Someone stuck his face in battery acid or something."

"Moss!" Kenner snapped, "Cool it. You're not helping." then he looked around for any signs of the missing machine gunner but found nothing, only some of his equipment, "Chin's not here captain, there's nothing. No blood and no body." it was then that Kenner looked upwards at the gaping hole in the vent made by the alien, "I can hazard a guess at where he went though."

The sound of movement from outside the room caused both marines to drop to their knees and aim their pulse rifles towards the door at the far end. However, it was Lawrence that appeared and when he saw the weapons pointed in his direction he called out.

"Stand down! Friendlies."

"Jesus gunny, I could have shot you." Kenner said.

"Yeah? Well make sure you check your targets first in future." Lawrence replied. Then he too looked around the room, his eyes lingering on Moore's body, "Get him out of here." he said, "Take him to Maddie on the *Neille* and tell her I want to know what could do that to a man."

"Okay Moss, you heard the gunny now move." Kenner said and the two men went to find something to wrap the dead marine's body in.

While they were gone Lawrence continued to investigate the hypersleep compartment, leaving the marines of Second Squad to gather up the discarded equipment that had belonged to Chin and Moore. The problem was that Kenner had been correct when he spoke of the lack of any evidence of what had happened to Chin. The marine had simply vanished and although it was likely that he had been taken into the vent there was nothing to suggest exactly what had been responsible for this.

"Somebody give me a leg up." he said, walking over to stand beneath the hole and Craig dashed over to help him.

Slinging his pulse rifle over his shoulder, Lawrence activated his shoulder mounted lamp and then reached up to pull himself through the hole in the vent. Inside the vent was empty and there was no more indication of what had happened to Chin in here than there was outside and so Lawrence dropped himself back down to the floor whereupon he saw the damage done to it by the alien's acidic blood and remembered the damage he had seen on the marines' camera feeds from beside where one of the missing hypersleep chambers had been as well as the damaged floor in the hangar. Hurrying across the room Lawrence inspected the earlier damage for himself.

"Captain are you getting this?" he asked, "The damage here looks the same as what's just been inflicted beneath the vent."

"I see it gunnery sergeant." Williams replied, "I'm on my way down, I want to see this for myself."

"Do you want me to send an escort?" Lawrence suggested.

"No, I'll be fine. I'm armed and it's not far. I'll be with you shortly." Williams answered.

Lawrence then looked around just in time to see Craig picking up Chin's pistol and releasing the slide. This prompted Lawrence to look down at the floor where he saw spent bullet casings scattered around. Walking back across the room he picked up one of the casings and looked around again. In the absence of any signs of whatever Chin had been desperate enough to empty his entire magazine at Lawrence expected to be able to see some damage to the hypersleep compartment that would correspond with at least some of the rounds but there was nothing to be seen. This could only mean that every bullet had hit its target only to be stopped dead without doing anything to the target itself. Then he remembered that Williams was on his way down from the bridge and that all he was armed with was a pistol identical to the one Chin had been armed with.

"Oh crap." he said, "Craig, with me!" and he started to run for the door.

"Gunny?" Craig responded, confused.

"Don't ask, just move." Lawrence exclaimed, "And I want that tracker running."

The two marines ran through the *Sulaco's* corridors with Lawrence leading them towards the bridge. Craig

did his best to keep an eye on the motion tracker but being in motion himself made getting accurate readings more difficult until a single blip appeared directly in their path.

"Gunny I've got a signal dead ahead." he said and Lawrence came to a sudden halt, raising his pulse rifle. "Distance?"

"Ten metres. That's right around the corner." Craig told him.

"Captain Williams!" Lawrence shouted.

"What?" Williams responded as he suddenly appeared around the corner and Lawrence breathed a sigh of relief, "I told you I didn't need an escort."

"I beg to differ captain." Lawrence said and he took a bullet casing from his pocket and tossed it to Williams who caught it with one hand, "Chin emptied an entire magazine at something and didn't do a damned thing."

"What the hell are we dealing with?" Williams said and Lawrence shook his head.

"Something that can stop bullets in their tracks, can survive in a hard vacuum for a prolonged period and spits or bleeds or pukes acid." Lawrence replied, "I think it came aboard on the drop ship that's down in the hangar. Or at least it's been down there. I saw more of the same damage to the drop ship's gear well and the deck beneath it."

"Okay we need to get back to the *Neille*." Williams said.

"What about Chin? We don't know he's dead." Lawrence pointed out.

"No, but I want to know more about what we're dealing with before we organise a proper search of the *Sulaco* for him." Williams said, "The main computer is on line now so we should be able to link to it from the *Neille* and download the mission files."

"Copying them is going to take time." Lawrence pointed out.

"Yes, I realise that. But we can secure the *Neille* better than we can secure any position aboard the *Sulaco*. All we need to do is seal the air lock and put a guard on it. Then once we can figure out what we're dealing with here we'll search the ship for Chin." Williams said before activating his radio headset, "Sergeant Thomas, what's your status?" he transmitted.

"We've accessed the *Sulaco*'s flight logs but they don't make sense. According to this the *Sulaco* was returning to earth at FTL speed before something overrode the system." Thomas answered.

"From inside the ship?" Williams asked. Though it was quite possible for someone to be aboard a starship travelling at faster than light speeds the time distortion they would experience would mean that they aged rapidly over the course of the journey which was why travellers spent their time in hypersleep. Leaving hypersleep in the middle of a journey was risky in the extreme. On the other hand to gain control of the ship remotely meant having access to highly restricted technical details about it.

"I can't tell at the moment. I'll need access to the communication logs as well to find that out." Thomas told him.

"Okay but it's going to have to wait. We're heading back to the *Neille*. I want you to make sure that the *Sulaco*'s computer is configured for remote network access and then wait to be escorted back to the *Neille*." Williams replied.

"An escort? We're both armed captain."

"Maybe so, but I've just had it pointed out to me that handguns may not be effective against whatever it is that's loose on the *Sulaco*. That's why we're pulling out."

"Understood. I'll check the computer's correctly configured." Thomas said.

"Sergeant Baker did you catch any of that?" Williams asked next.

"Affirmative captain." she replied.

"Does Niro have the auxiliary generators on line yet?" Williams said.

"Not yet captain." Niro himself answered, "I require parts that may be available from the *Sulaco*'s spares but I need to confirm that. If not then I will need to obtain them from the *Neille*."

"Get them from there anyway. I don't want anyone aboard the *Sulaco* for longer than necessary or going anywhere they don't need to be. In the meantime I need your group to head up to the bridge and rendezvous with Thomas and Farrow. Then head straight back to the *Neille*. We'll meet you there."

"Yes captain." Niro answered, "We will comply."

"Captain." Maddie said with a smile as she looked up to see Williams entering the *Neille*'s infirmary where she and Harris were still examining the body of the man found dead in the *Sulaco*'s corridor, "Come and look at this." and she waved him towards her.

"What have you found?" Williams asked as he approached her.

"Get that skeleton." Maddie said, looking at Harris.

"You know technically I ought to be giving the orders here." the other android replied as he went to fetch the skeletal remains of the facehugger that had been delivered to the *Neille* with the two bodies.

"Yeah, yeah. Whatever." Maddie responded. Then she turned the dead man's head to one side, "Look at this bruising." she said to Williams and she pointed to a set of marks on the skin that were visible where the dead man's hair was thinnest, "And there's even better here." she added, running her finger over a larger

discoloured patch that looked to run all the way around the dead man's neck.

"Was he hanged?" Williams asked.

"I considered that, but no and I don't think it was some sort of tight fitting collar either. It was this thing, whatever it is." Maddie said and she reached out to take the bagged skeleton from Harris. Then she placed it still inside its transparent plastic bag over the dead man's face, "See? The position of these fingers or more likely legs matches the location of the marks on his head while the wound to his neck was probably caused by this thing wrapping its tail around it."

"But what for?" Williams said, "It doesn't look like this guy's face was attacked in any way.

"No, these things appear to insert something down their victim's throat. This body has traces of scarring down the inside of its. I can't say for certain why it does this but given the damage done to our dead guy's chest I'd say that it's inserting some sort of embryo that develops inside the body before emerging." Maddie said.

"You mean like how some insects implant their larva into a host animal that gets eaten from the inside out?"

"Exactly. Captain this makes these creatures extremely dangerous. I would not recommend approaching them at all."

"I wasn't thinking of it." Williams said, "But I've got another body on its way to you. Moore's been killed and it looks like he was attacked by some sort of acid. I need you to examine his remains and see what you can learn from them. I need you to hurry, Chin's missing and we need to organise a search for him. Anything you can tell us that could help would be appreciated."

"Of course captain, you know I'll do anything you ask." Maddie replied and a smile spread across her face, "Absolutely anything. I mean that."

The *Neille's* starboard outer air lock slid shut and there was a 'thunk' as the display beside it changed to indicate that it was sealed. The umbilical connection to the *Sulaco* remained in place, however. The *Neille* was not going to pull away until the *Sulaco* was ready to proceed under its own power with its own crew and it was far from being ready for that.

"Air lock sealed." Lawrence transmitted.

"Copy that gunny." Taylor replied, "We're reading the seal as well."

Lawrence then turned to Kenner and Moss.

"You two can stand down now." he told them, "Go check your gear and grab something to eat."

"Aren't we going to find Chin, gunny?" Kenner asked.

"Of course we are. But the captain doesn't want us going in blind. He's going to check the *Sulaco's* logs to see if he can find out exactly what we're dealing with here. Maddie's examining Moore's body and she'll brief the captain on what she finds."

"Sure." Moss replied, snarling as he averted his gaze from Lawrence, "I'll bet the captain will be eager to debrief her while we sit on our asses and do nothing."

"You got a problem there marine?" Lawrence snapped, standing right in front of Moss and staring at him, "Well? Do you?"

"No gunnery sergeant." Moss replied.

"Good. Now do what I said. Check your gear and grab some chow. But if you disagree with the captain's decision then I'll gladly tell him that you've got a better plan. Do you have a better plan private?" Lawrence said.

"No gunnery sergeant."

"Okay then. Dismissed."

Kenner and Moss began to walk away and Lawrence then turned to where Niro had been stood watching the exchange.

"Don't you have somewhere to be?" he asked the android.

"I just wanted to be sure that the ship was properly secured." Niro replied, "I will be on my way to the *Neille's* parts stores. I need to procure replacement control circuits for the *Sulaco's* auxiliary power generators."

"Okay, you do that." Lawrence said and without another word the android turned around and walked away. Lawrence waited for Niro to disappear from view before he made his way to Williams' quarters.

"Come in." Williams called out when Lawrence knocked on his door and Lawrence entered the room to find Williams sat at a computer terminal and studying the screen.

"Found anything yet?" Lawrence asked.

"Nothing of real use right now." Williams replied, "Sergeant Thomas saw that the *Sulaco* had been on her way back to earth when she unexpectedly shut down her hyperdrive. I'm trying to find out what caused that."

"You're not examining the mission files?"

"I will. But there's only so much bandwidth available for transferring the data over here and the flight recorder logs are all that's come over so far. It's all vital information in the long run but I'm guessing that none of it will have any immediate impact on us." Williams explained.

"So why not just wait for the mission logs?"

"Just in case. If there is anything useful in here then I don't want to miss it because of a bad call. I'd-" Williams answered before he came to a sudden halt mid sentence.

"You'd what?" Lawrence said.

"Never mind. There is something here that's interesting." Williams said and he leant closer to the terminal screen.

"What?"

"The command that shut down the *Sulaco's* hyperdrive came from an external source. Look at this." Williams said, pointing to the display as Lawrence stood behind him and looked over his shoulder, "A USCM encoded command to drop out of FTL."

"Then there's air lock activity." Lawrence added, "Someone tripped the outer door and boarded the ship while the crew were in hypersleep."

"Yes, but only four of them. Look at these numbers here, the rest of the hypersleep chambers were inactive." Williams said and he quickly brought up the details of the individual hypersleep chambers, "Hicks, Dwayne. Bishop, Lance. Ripley, Ellen, Jordan, Rebecca."

"Who the hell are Ellen Ripley and Rebecca Jordan?" Lawrence said, "They weren't part of Bravo Team."

"Didn't your friend in the loading docks say something about a civilian woman getting on board the *Sulaco* with them?" Williams asked and Lawrence nodded.

"I suppose that accounts for one of them. But what about the other?"

"Must be someone that the *Sulaco* picked up at their destination. Wherever that was."

"Not got that data yet either?" Lawrence asked and Williams shook his head.

"The *Sulaco* was moving from system to system on its way home rather than risking a straight line course that would have kept it in deep space if there was an emergency. Thomas says he can't track her heading back to a point of origin. That's something else we need to wait for the mission files to find out." he replied, "Anyway, we've got the *Sulaco* being boarded by persons unknown. Then according to the flight recorder they just leave without accessing any of the systems as short time later. See, here's where the air lock is sealed again. But they just leave the *Sulaco* adrift when they go, they don't set her back on her way. As I see that gives us two possibilities. Either they wanted something that was aboard that ship and after they found it they didn't care what happened to the *Sulaco*, or alternatively they wanted to put something aboard her."

"Like an incendiary bomb to start a fire and destroy the ship?" Lawrence suggested.

"That's certainly one possibility. But I've got the feeling that it wasn't a bomb. I think it was related to whatever this creature is. Look at this." and Williams called up the data from the flight recorder right at the moment that it reported the fire in the hypersleep compartment, "The fire was electrical and it started under the floor of the hypersleep compartment. Aston found that corroded spot on the floor beside where one of the ejected chambers had been. I'm guessing that whatever it was that killed Moore and Douglas caused that and when the acid reached the wiring it started the fire. I think that this thing was also responsible for cutting that fuel line. According to the log the line was cut before the fire started. By the time the survivors ejected the *Sulaco* was already operating on reserve power."

"Do you want me to go through any of this stuff for you?" Lawrence asked but Williams shook his head.

"No, I can manage for now. Go and see how the men are doing. Let them know that we'll find out what happened to Chin soon."

9.

Harris had returned to the bridge, leaving Maddie alone to continue her examination of Moore's body. She had taken samples from what was left of the dead marine's face and placed them under a microscope to study them more closely. This had revealed some striking similarities with the burns she had found inside the body recovered from the *Sulaco's* corridor and so just to make sure she took more samples from the other dead body and placed both sets in a scanner.

The machine hummed and whirred as it studied each sample tray in turn to produce a full breakdown of the chemicals contained in each. The scanner was detailed enough to be able to differentiate between the DNA of the two men but this was information that did not concern Maddie, she just wanted to know about the chemical reactions that had caused the burns she had seen. However, before the results of the scan were complete Maddie was interrupted by the intercom.

"Maddie are you there?" Harris asked.

"Right here. Until Captain Williams comes up with something else for me to do anyway." she replied, "Why?"

"Are you accessing the *Sulaco's* records for your tests?"

"No, I've got everything I need right here. Scanners, computers and more dead bodies than I'd like."

"Well someone is. I'm looking at the bandwidth of the data transfer and the rate at which we're receiving has dropped by ten percent. The disruption appears to be at the source so I thought that maybe you were trying to access something."

"Can you tell what's being accessed?" Maddie said.

"No, all I know is that someone's doing something."

"What if it's aboard the *Sulaco* itself?" Maddie suggested, "Has anyone gone over there?"

"There's no indication that the air lock's been opened." Harris told her.

"Oh like that makes a difference. I bet I could bypass the sensor if I wanted to. Perhaps some of the marines have gone aboard without permission to try and find Chin. They might think that there's information in the *Sulaco's* logs that will lead them to him."

"Then we should alert Captain Williams."

"He won't like that and Gunnery Sergeant Lawrence will go berserk. But I tell you what, if we go over there then maybe we can get them to come back. They'll be easy to find because they'll have to go to the bridge to access the systems they need."

"Very well. I'll meet you in the air lock in ten minutes. I need to find someone to cover for me first." Harris told her.

"Did you have any trouble getting here?" Maddie asked when Harris joined her.

"No. I simply told Kraven that my leg needed further repairs and that I needed your help to do it." he replied, "Shall we get this over with?"

Entering the *Neille's* air lock together the two androids found an access panel just inside the outer door was open and inside someone had clipped a wire between two parts of the circuit, ensuring that even if the outer door was opened it would still read as closed to an observer on the bridge.

"Told you." Maddie said, "Still, at least Kraven won't notice us heading over to the *Sulaco* either." and she opened the outer door.

The androids closed the outer door from within the umbilical link before making their way across to the *Sulaco*. The marine vessel's air lock stood open, just as it had been left and Maddie and Harris entered without worrying about being observed. Now that the main reactor was back on line the interior of the ship was properly lit and the elevators were once again functioning, meaning that the two androids could use one to take them almost directly to the bridge.

"I suggest we advance with caution." Harris whispered as they stepped out of the elevator, "Whoever came aboard may be somewhat twitchy." and Maddie nodded.

"Okay, we move quietly so they don't hear us coming and run off before we can get to them. But I suggest we announce ourselves before entering the bridge. I'd hate to get shot by one of our own people."

"Agreed." Harris replied and then the pair of them started to creep towards the bridge.

With its door destroyed, the way to the bridge was unobstructed and both Maddie and Harris could hear the sound of someone sat at a console typing as they crept closer. Whoever it was seemed confident in their use of the console given the frequency of the keystrokes and the lack of any voices suggested that they were alone.

"I think there's just one." Maddie whispered and Harris nodded.

"This should make things easier then." he said, "We'll go right up to the door and then let whoever it is know that we're out here."

The two androids continued to creep towards the entrance to the bridge, halting just before they reached the ruined doorway and then Maddie called out.

"You know you really shouldn't be aboard the *Sulaco*. Those were Captain Williams' orders." she said and the sound of typing suddenly ceased, though there was no reply, "Harris and I are going to come in now. Okay?" and the pair stepped through the hole in the door.

The single individual already on the *Sulaco's* bridge was sat in a chair that faced away from the doorway and so it was not possible to see who it was from that angle while they continued to look towards their console.

"You should just come back with us." Harris said, "We've left your override attached to the *Neille's* air lock so no-one knows that any of us are here. You won't get in trouble."

"Well that's a relief." the individual in the chair responded before turning it around to face Maddie and Harris.

"You." Maddie said when she saw Niro looking at them, "What are you doing here?"

"My job of course." Niro replied, "I was given specific orders for this mission and I'm carrying them out."

"What are you doing?" Maddie said and she rushed to see what Niro had been doing when they disturbed him. When the display in front of Niro came into view Maddie came to a halt and looked straight at it, seeing that he had accessed the *Sulaco's* communication system and thus limiting the bandwidth remaining available for the data transfer in the process. He had not yet completed typing the message that he wished to send and the text of it was still shown on the display for Maddie to see.

SULACO LOCATED AND SECURED.

VESSEL DAMAGED BUT INTACT AND CAPABLE OF INDEPENDENT TRAVEL.

PRESENCE OF AT LEAST ONE ADULT SPECIMEN CONFIRMED.

USCM AND USASF CASUALTIES SO FAR: TWO DEAD, ONE MISSING. WITHIN EXPECTED PARAMETERS.

REMAINING CREW UNAWARE OF NATURE OF THREAT.

PROCEEDING WITH NEXT STAGE.

"What is this?" Maddie asked.

"What is what?" Harris added.

"Look at this." Maddie told him and then she looked at Niro, "He knows what's going on here. He knows what's aboard this ship killing people. He knew before we even got on board."

"Not quite true." Niro replied as he got out of his chair, "I was merely given access to the same information that Bravo Team were provided with before they were deployed. I didn't even know if the *Sulaco* was still out here or not. Nobody back on earth does. I was simply ordered to let them know if the ship was located and what its condition was.

"What's this about an 'adult specimen' Niro?" Harris asked as he came close enough to read the text of the message himself.

"Please don't come any closer." Niro responded and in an unexpected move he reached into a pocket in his overalls and produced a pistol that he aimed directly at Harris.

"You brought a weapon?" Maddie exclaimed.

"Of course I did." Niro replied, "I knew that I may need to defend myself if I was discovered here. Of course I was expecting it to be the alien that Bravo Team were supposed to locate, not the two of you."

"So why draw it then?" Harris asked, "You're fitted with the same behavioural inhibitor that we are. You are incapable of harming or by omission of action allowing to be harmed, a human being. Now hand over that weapon before someone gets hurt and we can go and tell Captain Williams what it is that his men are facing."

"Well you are right about one thing Harris," Niro said, "though not that I should surrender to you and tell that busybody Captain Williams what it is that he's up against. He's made quite a nuisance of himself asking questions about what happened to the *Sulaco*. But you are right about me not being able to harm a human being. Too bad for the pair of you that neither of you are human." and then he pulled the trigger of his pistol. The bullet struck Harris just below where the base of a human's rib cage would be and easily penetrated the synthetic muscles there until it struck the power cell contained at his core. The reaction to this impact was swift and absolute as the power cell simply exploded inside Harris, producing a short jet of flame that erupted through the hole in the front of his torso and widening it as the flames spread throughout his insides. Harris's jaw dropped and his eyes widened as in his last few moments his brain realised what had happened before it shut down permanently and he collapsed on the spot into a lifeless burning heap on the floor.

Maddie gasped when she saw this and stepped back from Niro just as he swung the pistol towards her.

In an air vent on the level above the *Sulaco's* bridge the alien halted its way crawling along the vent at the sound of the pistol shot. The sound was familiar to the alien and it associated it with just one thing.

The presence of prey.

Turning around in the vent, the alien hissed before it began to bound back towards the source of the sound.

Taking another step backwards Maddie felt herself back into another control console and she put a hand out

to steady herself. As she put this down on the console she felt something under it though, a communication headset and all of a sudden an idea occurred to her. Moving her hand across the console and guiding it by touch alone she found a control that would activate the *Sulaco's* ship to ship communications and activated them.

"You realise that you can't win, don't you Niro?" she said, "Even if you kill me like you did Harris you can't do anything to the others. They're all human. You can't even stand back and let them be killed by that thing that's aboard this ship."

"You realise that you can't win, don't you Niro? Even if you kill me like you did Harris you can't do anything to the others. They're all human. You can't even stand back and let them be killed by that thing that's aboard this ship."

Kraven sat up straight and his eyes widened when he heard this coming over the *Neille's* communication system and he quickly reached for the intercom.

"Captain Taylor, Captain Williams, you need to get to the bridge immediately. We have a situation aboard the *Sulaco*."

"Don't be so stupid Madison." Niro said, "I don't have to kill any of the *Neille's* crew and I certainly don't intend to allow any more of them to be killed."

"Then what are you going to do?" Maddie asked and Niro grinned.

"What else? I'm going to steal the *Sulaco*." he said, "I can fly this ship back to earth where the alien can be removed safely for study."

"What about the time dilation? Your precious specimen could be long dead by the time you reach earth."

"Perhaps. But at least there will be an intact corpse to be studied. Plus the eggs I'm guessing are contained in those canisters down in the hypersleep compartment of course. If our information is correct then they have a lifespan of thousands of years and it only requires one of them to survive the voyage for my superiors to breed a new generation of live specimens to study."

Williams and Taylor looked at one another as they heard this.

"I need to go. Don't let the *Sulaco* escape." Williams said and Taylor nodded.

"Mister Kraven bring our weapons on line. If the *Sulaco* gives any indication of powering its engines then I want you to put a rail gun round through its reactor."

"Yes captain." Kraven replied.

"So what are you going to do to me?" Maddie asked and she glanced at Harris, "Am I going to end up dead because of the technicality of not being human as well?"

"If you give me no choice then yes, I'm afraid that's exactly what's going to happen. On the other hand I can just take you back with me and return you to your rightful owner." Niro replied.

"Captain Williams is my rightful owner." Maddie replied frowning.

"Madison you were given to Colonel Decker in exchange for his support of Weyland-Yutani, not Captain Williams. When we get back General Stern will see to it that you go right back to him."

"The Corps won't allow it." Maddie said, "I'm Captain Williams' assistant now."

"You're a toy Madison, a battery powered concubine built to provide sexual gratification to whoever your registered owner happens to be and nothing more. The Marine Corps tolerates your presence but you aren't on any official roster. Now remove your overalls."

"You're kidding me." Maddie replied.

"If I place you in hypersleep then you may attempt to escape or sabotage the vessel when we awaken. I intend to remove your power cell and for that I need to be able to access it. Surely even your sex obsessed programming can comprehend that as an android I have no such interest in you. Now do as I say and strip to your underwear."

Maddie sighed and reached for the fastener at her collar.

"Just for the record," she began as she undid her collar, "I am not obsessed with sex." and at that point she unexpectedly dived at Niro, reaching out for his pistol.

Maddie grabbed Niro by both his wrists moments before her full weight slammed into him and the force of her impact against him sent him falling backwards. The two androids then found themselves rolling around on the floor as they both attempted to control which way the pistol was pointing in, Niro trying to point it at Maddie while she was just satisfied keeping it pointed away from her. Had they both been human then Niro's larger size and muscle mass would have given him a distinct advantage but as an android Maddie was just as strong as he was and the pair were too evenly matched for either to gain an advantage and that played right into Maddie's hands. All she could do now was hope that activating the *Sulaco's* ship to ship communications had alerted the crew of the *Neille* and help was on its way.

Maddie tried forcing Niro's hand to the floor, slamming it down as hard as she could repeatedly in the hope

that it would cause him to relax his grip and let go of the weapon but he managed to hold onto it. All of a sudden Niro managed to get his empty hand free and he reached up to grab Maddie beneath her jaw, pressing against it to tilt her head back. His intention was obvious, he was hoping to apply enough pressure to snap the control ligaments in her neck, rendering her immobile and helpless. Maddie quickly grabbed hold of him by the wrist again, pulling back down to release the pressure on her neck though unable to break his grip on her.

“Just give up Madison.” he hissed, “No one needs to get hurt. The crew of the *Neille* will all survive and you can remain fully operational as well. If you don't want to go back to Colonel Decker then I'm sure that my superiors would be willing to reward you for bringing them the creature.”

“Never.” she gasped back at him, having trouble forming the words while his hand was around her throat. Then both she and Niro heard a hissing sound coming from across the bridge and both turned their heads towards the doorway to see the alien creature standing in the hole that had been cut in the door, its hands gripping the edge of the hole as it appeared to stare at the two androids as they wrestled despite its lack of obvious eyes. Both androids stared at the alien, focusing on its massive claws, barbed tail and the double set of jaws it possessed before they both turned to look at Niro's pistol, the only weapon that they had between them.

Maddie threw her weight sideways, towards the alien and this caused both her and Niro to roll over so that their positions were reversed and he was now on top of her. It also meant that his pistol was pointing roughly towards the alien and Maddie pushed his arm to correct his aim before Niro fired.

The first shot struck the alien almost dead centre of its head but had no noticeable effect on the beast. Then Niro fired again and this time did so repeatedly but each time the effect was the same and he and Maddie watched as every bullet seemed to bounce off the alien's toughened hide. Then one round clipped the alien in the shoulder where its body was less well protected and Maddie saw a brief spurt of greenish fluid that struck a nearby console and immediately began to dissolve through the casing.

This injury seemed to spur the alien into action and it let out a sudden screech before leaping through the doorway and charging straight at the androids. At the last moment it lunged forwards, leaping off the floor to slam into Niro and send him flying away from Maddie as the alien went along with him. Maddie scrambled across the floor, backing away until her path was blocked by a control console and she watched as the alien tore into Niro.

The android still had hold of his pistol and he tried to point it at the alien but his opponent was too quick and it lashed out with its tail, the bladed tip cutting right through Niro's arm about midway between the wrist and elbow and both the android's hand as well as the pistol it held dropped to the floor as milky white fluid poured from both parts of the severed limb. Feeling no pain, Niro just gasped before the alien thrust its fist down at him and punched him in the chest with such force that the artificial rib cage that protected the assorted pumps that filled the same role as a human's heart would just snapped and the soft components inside were crushed and burst open. Instinctively the alien grabbed hold of some of the contents of Niro's chest and dragged them back out through the wound as the android watched in horror. Then as his last action he turned to look directly at Maddie.

“Help me.” he said as synthetic fluids poured from his mouth and then the alien opened its mouth wide and lowered its head so that the smaller set of jaws could shoot out and punch through one of Niro's eyes, breaking through his skull and destroying the processing circuitry contained within it.

As soon as Niro went limp and slumped sideways to the floor the alien turned to look at Maddie and it hissed. Then she gasped as the alien leapt towards her, landing so that its head was just centimetres away from her. Trembling, Maddie tried to avert her gaze as she waited for the creature to strike at her while she was trapped and defenceless. Sure enough the alien opened its mouth and out of the corner of her eyes she saw the smaller secondary set of teeth extend towards her. Maddie felt these press gently against the side of her head and she closed her eyes in anticipation of a lethal strike. But instead of finishing her off the alien retracted its teeth, hissed once again and then leapt away from her, darting out of the bridge and into the corridor outside.

Moving quickly Maddie crawled across the floor of the bridge and scooped up Niro's dropped pistol, ejecting the magazine to check how many rounds were left just in case the alien returned. She saw just three bullets still in the magazine which made for a total of four including the one in the chamber. Having seen how more than a dozen had failed to do anything more than irritate the alien Maddie was left in little doubt that this was not enough to defend her against the alien and she quickly crawled to the remains of Niro, ignoring the large pool of synthetic tissue fluid that had formed on the floor around him as she started to rummage through his pockets in search of any extra ammunition he may have been carrying.

Hearing the sound of running in the corridor outside Maddie suddenly pointed the pistol towards the doorway, using both hands to grip the weapon and leaning over a console for a mix of cover and support. But rather than the alien returning the first figure to come through the doorway was Williams with a pulse rifle in his hands.

“Maddie!” he called out.

"Here!" she responded, dropping the pistol and leaping out of her hiding place to rush towards him and embrace him tightly.

"Thanks." Williams said as he pushed her away, "Are you okay?" and Maddie nodded. Then she looked at what was left of Harris.

"Niro killed Harris." she said, "He shot him through his power cell when we found him here."

"And what the hell happened to Niro?" Lawrence asked as he and some of the other marines stepped through the hole in the door.

"The creature, the one that killed Moore and Douglas, it was here. It's huge. It's strong and it's tough. It just tore him apart. I thought I was next but it just left."

"Maybe it heard us coming." Lawrence suggested but Maddie shook her head.

"No, I was able to get across the room and start searching Niro for more ammunition before you arrived. Besides, it had all the opportunity it needed to kill me before it left. It felt like it was studying me or something." she said.

"You're not human." Williams pointed out, "Perhaps it wasn't sure what to make of you."

"It really did a number on Niro though." Sergeant Baker pointed out and Maddie looked at her.

"Niro shot it." she said, "Put a dozen rounds into it and barely broke its skin. Look you can see where some of its blood got on that console over there." and she pointed to where the console had been melted by the alien's highly corrosive fluid.

"Perhaps it didn't see you as a threat or a meal." Lawrence suggested and Williams nodded.

"It's as good a reason as any." he said before looking straight at Maddie, "Now what were you doing here?"

"Harris noticed that the data transfer from the *Sulaco* to the *Neille* was slowing down and we figured someone had come aboard without permission to search for Chin. We came here to bring them back before you found out and they got into trouble. But instead of a marine we found Niro sat right over there." and she pointed to the chair that Niro had been sat in when he was discovered, "The reason the data transfer had slowed was because he'd activated the *Sulaco*'s long range communications. He was getting ready to send a message to someone back on earth I think."

Williams and Lawrence crossed the bridge to see what Niro had been doing and both men read the text of the message he had been preparing to send.

"So he knew about this thing." Lawrence said.

"He was going to take the *Sulaco* back to earth with it still on board." Maddie said, "There's someone there that wants it. He thought that the containers in the hypersleep compartment might contain eggs that can be used to hatch out more of those things."

"You know this fits with what Sergeant Major Castle told me." Lawrence said, "He said that Bravo Team and the *Sulaco* were sent out on some sort of black op. Whoever set that up must be trying again with us."

"Well they're going to have to find another one." Williams said as he reached down and hit the 'CANCEL' command on the terminal Niro had been using, deleting the message before it could be sent. Then he looked around at his men, "Now let's get back to the *Neille*. We'll come back and search for Chin as soon as we've got a better idea of what's going on here."

"Captain we need to hurry." Maddie said, "My examination of the body that was found with the chest wound suggests that it had something implanted inside it. I think that whatever is inside the eggs implants a larval stage inside a host organism that hatches out into one of the creatures that is attacking us. Chin may have been taken to use as another host. If we don't find him in time then we could be dealing with two of them."

"How long is that likely to take?" Lawrence asked and Maddie shrugged.

"I don't know." she said, "I've no idea how long the gestation period may be, how big the creature will be when it emerges or how long it will take to reach adulthood. Niro seemed to think that we're dealing with an adult though I can't be one hundred percent sure that he was right."

"Okay we can't afford to wait." Williams announced, "If that thing bleeds acid then we can't risk shooting it. Apart from the danger to ourselves from splash back, there's the risk that the acid could eat through the hull or start another fire."

"Flame units?" Lawrence suggested and Williams nodded.

"We've got some back in our stores on the *Neille*. Plus hopefully the Air Force can rustle up a couple of more for us from their armoury. We'll start at one end of the ship and sweep along it, sealing doors and hatches as we go so it can't creep back around us. If anyone finds it just toast the damned thing." Williams said.

"I bet the *Sulaco*'s armoury will have some in as well." Lawrence suggested.

"What about the PIGs?" Cooper suggested referring to the two phased-plasma infantry guns that were a part of Alpha Team's compliment of anti-armour weaponry, "Those things will fry anything."

"They'll also punch a hole right through the hull of you're not careful private." Lawrence pointed out.

"We'll leave them in reserve for now." Williams said, "Flame units ought to be sufficient."

10.

By drawing on the supplies of flame units contained in Alpha Team's own equipment as well as the armouries of both the *Neille* and the *Sulaco*, the marines were able to gather together enough of the weapons that every member of the team as well as the three USASF crew members could be issued with one.

"The fire suppression system aboard the *Sulaco* has been temporarily disabled." Williams told his troops as they gathered together near the *Neille*'s air lock, "So you don't need to worry about firing your flame unit and suddenly getting trapped by bulkheads dropping down automatically."

"It also means that if any of you jar heads torches a fuel dump the fire will rage out of control until all of us are dead." Lawrence added, "So make sure you know what it is that you're shooting at."

"Precisely." Williams commented, "Now we'll be moving in pairs, starting from the rear of the ship by the engines. From there we'll make our way forwards, sealing each hatch as we come to it, this way I'm hoping to steadily reduce the number of places that this creature can hide. Don't be afraid to use your flame units to clear out areas of the ship where it could be hiding before moving through them. We'll corner the creature and then we'll kill it" Williams then looked at Maddie, "Maddie will stay aboard the *Neille* to monitor our progress."

"You're not staying here sir?" Baker asked and Williams turned towards her.

"No." he replied, "Gunnery Sergeant Lawrence and I will make up one of the search teams. The more boots on the ground we've got the better. We'll only have six teams as it is and that's not much for searching every single corridor and ventilation shaft. Each team will have a motion tracker so use them to monitor Now are there any questions?" Williams paused to see whether any of his troops would have any questions but no one came forwards and Williams nodded, "Okay then, let's go."

Monitored from the bridge of the *Neille*, the marines boarded the *Sulaco* as a single group and made their way to the rear of the ship where the massive rocket engines and the industrial carbon-diamond powder used as reaction mass were located.

"Okay we've got four exits from here." Williams announced, "Aston and Holmes and Craig and Holden will take the corridor leading down the port side of the ship. Baker and Cooper will take starboard while Gunnery Sergeant Lawrence and myself head along the central passageway. That leaves Kenner and Moss and Thomas and Farrow to take the vents. Remember close every hatch as you go through and stay in contact. Maddie's monitoring us from the *Neille* so listen out for any information from her. She'll be making sure that the hatches are locked down after we've been through so if you need to back trace your steps let her know which hatches you need opening."

Cautiously the marines began to move forwards from the *Sulaco*'s engineering section, sealing the hatches behind them so that the alien loose on the ship would not be able to pass through them. The *Sulaco* was approximately three hundred and eighty-five metres long and designed to be able to support a crew of ninety. If properly configured, this number could be increased to two thousand so having only a dozen marines available to conduct the search meant that each team had a lot of ground to cover.

Within each pair of marines one led the way with their flame unit held at the ready while their partner remained behind them watching their motion tracker. All of this was monitored carefully by Maddie from the *Neille*'s bridge and when the team consisting of Williams and Lawrence had gone just a short distance along the *Sulaco*'s central access corridor she activated her radio headset.

"Gunny could you stop right there?" she said and both Lawrence and Williams came to a halt.

"What's wrong? Do you see something?" Lawrence asked.

"Turn you head to the right a bit." Maddie told him, "Good, now up a bit. There that's it."

"What? I don't see anything." Lawrence said.

"Maddie if there's something here I'd like to know about it." Williams said.

"I'm not picking anything up on the tracker." Lawrence added.

"I'm seeing just what I want to." Maddie muttered.

"What was that Maddie? I didn't catch it." Williams said.

On the *Neille*'s bridge Taylor looked around towards Maddie and saw the array of monitors showing the feeds from each of the head mounted cameras worn by the marines and he sighed.

"Captain Williams," he transmitted, "I believe that your android is making use of the gunny's camera to stare at your ass."

"Maddie we don't have time for this." Williams said angrily, "I tell you what, if I promise to have sex with you before we go back into hypersleep will you just do what I've asked you to?"

"I'm on the case Captain Williams." Maddie replied, saluting the feed from his camera while at the front of the bridge Kraven and Michaels exchanged glances. Then Michaels looked around at Taylor.

"Excuse me captain," he said, "I think I speak for both Kraven and myself when I say that offering to have sex with us will not motivate us to work faster. In fact it may be counter productive."

"Don't worry, I'm not obsessed with it like she is." Taylor replied.

"Careful captain." Maddie said, "You don't want to know what happened to the last person who said I was obsessed with sex."

When Thomas and Farrow reached the section of the *Sulaco* just forward of its main fusion reactor they came to a shaft within the ventilation system that led straight down into the ship's infra-red masking and communications tower.

"Anything?" Thomas asked, looking at Farrow while he held his flamethrower over the edge of the shaft and she checked her motion tracker. The interior of the ventilation system was not illuminated and both marines were making use of handheld lamps to light their way. Thomas had his strapped to his flamethrower while Farrow held hers in her free hand.

"Nothing." she replied, shaking her head.

"Okay, we go down." Thomas said and he fired a quick blast of flame down the shaft to make certain that it was clear. Then with Thomas going first the two marines started to climb down the shaft, "Madison close the hatch at the top of shaft delta-four-nine." Thomas signalled and above him and Farrow a hatch slid closed across the shaft.

"Damn it's hot in here." Farrow commented as the pair descended further down the tower.

"That's what this things for. All that waste heat from the reactor has to go somewhere." Thomas replied.

"I know that sarge. It's just that it doesn't make it any less sweltering." Farrow said.

"Well-" Thomas began before all of a sudden he put his hand in something sticky and stopped talking.

"What's wrong?" Farrow asked as Thomas looked at the translucent goop now stuck to the end of his fingers.

"Check the tracker. Quick!" he hissed as he wiped the substance off his fingers and unslung his flamethrower before pointing it down the shaft.

"There's nothing." Farrow said, "We're the only ones in here."

"Are you sure? Something's been here."

"I'm cert-" Farrow began before there was a brief pulse on the motion tracker's display, "Wait, I've got something."

"Okay sling that tracker and get your flame unit ready." Thomas ordered and while Farrow did as she was told he reached to turn on his radio, "This is Thomas," he broadcast, keeping his voice as low as he could, "Farrow and I are in the IR dumping tower. There's something in here with us."

"Everyone hold position." Williams ordered, "Where are Kenner and Moss."

"We're about forty metres above the tower." Kenner responded.

"There are about a dozen sealed hatches between them." Maddie added, "I can release them if you want."

"I've got movement again." Farrow exclaimed as her motion tracker made a sound that alerted her to another brief signal.

"Where?" Thomas asked and Farrow reached for the tracker again.

"I don't know, it's gone again." she said, "Wait no, there it is again. Below us. Perhaps twenty metres."

Thomas pointed his flame unit down the shaft again and let loose with a brief blast.

"Okay let's go. But slowly." he said and keeping his flamethrower in one hand he continued to descend the shaft, continuing for another five metres before he came to a sudden stop, "*Neille*, are you seeing this?" he transmitted.

"I'm seeing it alright." Maddie replied.

"What the hell is that?" Taylor asked, leaning towards her in his chair when he saw the image on the display.

"I've no idea." Thomas replied, keeping his camera pointed at the strange resin coating the sides of the shaft below him, "But I can tell you that it shouldn't be here."

"What's going on down there?" Williams asked.

"Captain it looks like there's some sort of alien substance covering the interior of part of the infra-red masking tower." Maddie replied, "Do you want Sergeant Thomas and Corporal Farrow to continue?"

"No. Hold them where they are." Williams ordered, "I want all units to converge on the tower now."

"Understood captain." Thomas said, "Holding position."

"Hey! Is there someone up there?" a voice cried out from below Thomas and Farrow and the pair looked at one another as they recognised it.

"Chin? Chin is that you?" Thomas called out into the darkness.

"Yeah it's me. Come get me out of this thing."

"What thing?" Thomas asked.

"Just come and help me okay? I'm stuck down here." Chin responded.

"What about the alien?" Farrow asked, "Is it down there?"

"How the hell should I know?" Chin shouted back, "I can barely see a thing down here. It's pitch black."

"Okay we're on our way." Thomas said and he slung his flame unit again and made his way deeper down the

tower into the resin coated section with Farrow following close after him. Thomas continued until he reached an area of the shaft that widened out into a small chamber used for accessing the communication antenna control systems directly. Just as in the shaft leading up to the top of the tower the interior of this was coated in what appeared to be a resin compound. But in addition to being used to cover every available surface the resin had been used to bind Chin to one of the walls. "Get me the hell down from here." he said as Thomas shone his light towards the machine gunner. "It's Chin." Thomas transmitted, "We've found him, he's alive. Farrow give me a hand here." Thomas and Farrow rushed over to Chin and drew their knives, using them to hack at the resin to try and dislodge him. "Sergeant Thomas what's his condition?" Maddie asked as she watched this. The feed from both marines' cameras was being disrupted by the structure of the tower but she could just about make out what was going on. "He seems unharmed." Thomas answered. "I'll be just fine once you get me out of this." Chin added. "Sergeant I need you to ask Private Chin to detail his encounter with the alien life form." Maddie said. "Chin, tell us about the alien." Thomas said. "Damned thing's huge. It dropped out of the vent and sent me flying across the room before it took a full magazine from my pistol without stopping. Then the next thing I remember was waking up here like this." Chin explained. "Wait, did he just say he lost consciousness?" Maddie asked. "That's what it sounded like." Thomas replied as he was finally able to pull a large section of the resin away, freeing one side of Chin. "Captain Williams I need to examine Private Chin immediately." Maddie transmitted, "I'm concerned that he may have been impregnated by the alien." "Get him to the infirmary right away." Williams ordered, "Everyone else get back to your assigned search areas. That alien's got to be here somewhere." "Go." Taylor told Maddie as she turned towards him, "I'll take over for you and co-ordinate with Williams." Without speaking, Maddie got out of her seat and ran from the bridge, heading to meet the marines at the *Neille's* air lock. Meanwhile Thomas and Farrow completed the procedure of breaking Chin free of the resin that bound him. "How are you feeling?" Thomas asked, passing Chin a canteen of water and he took a drink. "Sore all over." he replied, "Being stuck like that wasn't exactly comfortable. Now can we get the hell out of here?" "Sure, follow me. Farrow will bring up the rear." Thomas replied and he headed back to the ladder that would take them to the top of the tower. Given that the search had been conducted starting at the rear of the *Sulaco* and the air lock was forward of their current position the only sealed hatch was the one at the top of the tower and Taylor released this before they reached it. The marines exited the ventilation ducts as quickly as they could and ran towards the air lock connecting the *Sulaco* with the *Neille*. But when they were only about half way there Chin suddenly halted and grabbed his stomach, gasping. "Chin, are you okay?" Farrow asked. "Fine." Chin croaked, "It's just cramp." "Well let's keep going. Maddie will check you out and get you back into action." Thomas said. "Maddie?" Chin responded, smiling, "Hopefully she won't clear me too quickly." "Come on you pervert." Farrow said and she reached out to help Chin along, providing him with support. Reaching the *Sulaco's* air lock, the three marines saw Maddie standing at the opposite end of the umbilical connection just inside the open air lock and she waved them towards her. "Come on!" she called out, "I need to get him to the infirmary." "I'll be fine." Chin replied. "Then why do you need us to help you stand?" Farrow asked as she and Thomas supported him while they headed towards the *Neille*. "What's his condition?" Maddie asked when the marines arrived at her side of the umbilical and stepped into the *Neille's* air lock and she closed the outer door behind them. "Complaining about everything." Farrow replied, "So normal." "No unusual symptoms?" Maddie said, moving around in front of Chin and shining a compact torch into his eyes to see how he reacted. "Just a bit of cramp" Chin said, "Nothing-" but then he suddenly coughed and as he did so he brought up a mouthful of blood that sprayed across Maddie, causing her eyes to widen as she stepped back in alarm, "What the-" Chin began before all off a sudden he coughed up another mouthful of blood and started to convulse. "Holy crap!" Thomas exclaimed, "Quick! Get him down." and he and Farrow lowered Chin to the floor of the

air lock where they tried to hold him still.

"He'll swallow his tongue." Farrow said, "Get something in his mouth."

"My knife." Thomas said, looking at Maddie, "Use the handle."

Maddie nodded and reached for the marine pilot's knife, plucking it from its sheath before trying to wedge it between Chin's firmly clenched teeth. Chin meanwhile continued to convulse wildly, his legs kicking out and making it even more difficult for Maddie to try and get the knife handle into his mouth. She was finally able to get the knife handle into Chin's mouth when he let out a sudden scream and arched his back. At the same time there was an unusual tearing sound and large patch of blood appeared on the front of his shirt, just below the bottom of his ribs.

"Oh my-" Farrow began, as she, Thomas and Maddie all stared at the fresh wound right as Chin's torso suddenly exploded outwards, showering all three with blood and both Thomas and Farrow recoiled, letting go of Chin.

Then came a high pitched screeching sound as the head of a serpentine creature tore its way through Chin's shirt and Maddie instantly recognised the general shape of its head as being a smaller and smoother version of the alien warrior's skull. It possessed tiny sets of vestigial limbs but these were obviously useless at this stage in its physical development. Now that the alien's emergence was complete Chin went limp, the last of his life spent in birthing the creature that had just burst out of his chest. With Maddie and the two marines staring at it, the chestburster turned its blood covered head towards them and gave the appearance of studying them just as they were studying it.

Instinctively Thomas reached out with both hands to grab hold of the chestburster and he was successful in wrapping his hands around its body just below its head.

"Got it!" he exclaimed. But the chestburster was not about to accept being restrained without a fight and the creature propelled itself out of the hole in Chin's chest using its tail. The thick coating of Chin's blood on its skin made it slippery to hold and it slipped right through Thomas's grasp before coiling around one of his arms on its way up towards his shoulder. The chestburster screeched again as it slithered up the marine's arm before opening its jaws as wide as they would go and biting deep into the front of his neck.

Thomas let out a strange gurgling sound as he fell backwards and reached for his throat, hoping to stop the bleeding. Meanwhile the chestburster propelled itself over his shoulder and started to slither off down the corridor.

"Don't let it get away!" Maddie snapped as she dived towards Thomas and also pressed her hands over the wound in his neck that was spurting out blood. Farrow leapt to her feet and unslung her flamethrower, activating the ignition flame and pointing it in the direction of the fleeing chestburster and Maddie's eyes widened, "No don't it'll-" she began just as Farrow pulled the flamethrower's trigger and a jet of fire erupted from the muzzle. This passed over the chestburster and Farrow was about to adjust her aim downwards when all of a sudden a klaxon sounded and bulkhead doors came sliding down to block the corridor in both directions.

"Fire in starboard air lock." an automated female voice announced, "All crew to damage control stations. Fire in starboard airlock. All crew to damage control stations."

"Set off the fire alarm." Maddie said, frowning.

"What's going on down there?" Taylor asked from the bridge, "He had seen the events unfolding in the air lock on the camera feeds from both Thomas and Farrow but the field of view was too narrow and the movements too rapid for him to have made everything out clearly.

"Chin's dead. Something was inside him, some sort of creature." Farrow replied, "It got away before we could stop it and your doors just locked us in here."

"Thomas is dead too." Maddie added, taking her hands away from his throat now that the blood loss could do no further harm, "Can you let us out of here?"

"Opening the doors now." Taylor replied, "But I want a full report on what it is that's loose on my ship."

11.

"Now there are two of these things on the loose?" Lawrence said to Williams and the officer sighed.

"It looks that way." he replied, "Plus we've lost Thomas and Chin."

"So what now?"

"We carry on with the plan." Williams said and he activated his radio headset, "Now hear this," he broadcast, aware that his troops would have heard the exchange between Taylor and the marines in the Neille's air lock and so would be aware of the deaths of their comrades, "We're going to continue our sweep of the Sulaco. I want every compartment, corridor and shaft searched and sealed until we've found the alien and killed it. Then if the Air Force haven't already caught the creature loose on the *Neille* by then we'll head back there to help them secure their ship. Craig and Holden, we're a team down in the vents so I want you to replace them. Head for the top of the IR masking tower and work forwards from there. Understood?"

"Copy that captain, we're on our way." Craig responded.

"You think the Air Force will need our help?" Lawrence asked and Williams shrugged.

"They're only chasing a newborn creature." he said, "Hopefully it won't be that dangerous to armed troops who know what they're looking for."

"There's only three of the *Neille*'s crew left to search for it though." Lawrence pointed out and Williams nodded, reaching for his headset again.

"Captain Taylor are you there?" he transmitted.

"Right here Williams."

"I'm going to leave Maddie and Farrow with you to help out. I'd like Maddie to check out the *Sulaco*'s logs as they come in but Farrow can help you with the search for that second creature." Williams said.

"Thanks, that's appreciated. I'll stick right here to monitor your progress." Taylor responded.

Williams then looked around. He and Lawrence had reached as far as the *Sulaco*'s crew quarters and were going through each cabin in turn. Though Bravo Team had not spent long aboard the ship there were signs of their presence scattered around this area of the ship and it was a grim reminder that although there was no concrete proof of what had happened to any of them yet, all the signs were pointing to most of them having been killed. But until they had answers to exactly what fate had befallen them, Alpha Team still had a job to do and the marines continued with the task of hunting for the alien warrior hidden somewhere aboard the *Sulaco*.

As it returned to its nest the alien knew that something was wrong before it made it all the way there. There were scent trails that had not been present when the alien had left and the smell of the captive being used to incubate another of its kind was now just a trace as well. Sure enough when the alien climbed all the way down the tower it found Chin missing while there were fragments of the resin that had been used to secure him to the wall scattered all around.

The alien let out an angry hiss before turning around on the spot and starting to climb back up the tower in search of more prey.

"How come we get this job?" Holden asked as Craig opened the access hatch to the *Sulaco*'s network of air vents. Holden then fired two quick blasts from his flame unit into the vent to ensure that if the alien was hiding just inside it would be forced to retreat rather than being able to ambush the marines as soon as they entered it.

"Same as search the port side compartments if you ask me." Craig responded, holding his motion tracker into the vent before either he or Holden entered it.

"Yeah right, just the same. Apart from there being no lights, lots of tight turns and not enough room to stand. Plus that thing seems to be living in here."

"All the more reason to put as many of us in the vents as possible." Craig said, "Now come on. I want payback for what that thing's done."

"Sure. Out of my way." Holden said before he climbed into the vent ahead of Craig.

"Craig where are you?" Kenner's voice asked over the radio network just as Craig and Holden were starting to make their way towards the *Sulaco*'s infra-red masking tower.

"Just aft of main frame seven." Craig responded.

"Are you reading anything around frame eight?" Kenner asked, "Moss is getting an intermittent reading around there. It keeps appearing for a few moments then vanishing again. But it's always in about the same place."

"That's what Thomas and Farrow picked up before they found Chin." Holden pointed out.

"Converge on that spot." Williams interrupted, overhearing the exchange between the two search teams,

"Use extreme caution."

"Copy that captain. We're on our way in." Kenner replied.

The two teams searching the vents then began to move towards the source of the movement picked up by Moss and as they drew closer Craig also saw a sudden pulse on his motion tracker.

"I've got it too." he said, "Intermittent movement in one spot. Right around frame eight."

"This is Taylor." the *Neille's* captain signalled, "There's a main vent fan around frame eight of a Conestoga. Could you be reading that?"

"It's possible." Kenner replied, "That would explain why the reading's always in the same place."

"Don't take any chances." Lawrence said, "Assume it's the alien until you've proven it isn't."

"Never intended otherwise gunny." Craig said, "We'll be there in about five minutes."

The marines continued to advance towards the source of the movement, with the marine equipped with the motion tracker in each team bringing up the rear. The team that consisted of Craig and Holden was closest to the source and they reached the area ahead of Kenner and Moss. While they were still several metres away the sound of the fan turning and Craig checked his tracker.

"It is the fan." he said, "I'm reading it clearly." and Holden scowled."

"Waste of damn time man." he hissed before he started to make his way closer to the fan. This was located above the vent that the marines were currently in, pulling air up a vertical shaft that led to the vents on the vessel's next level above. Holden paused just as he came to the vertical shaft and peered upwards, pointing his flamethrower up it. From here he could see the fan spinning in the shaft, blocking the entire area. The beam of Holden's light shining through the fan's spinning blades produced a pattern of shadows in the shaft above it, making it impossible for the marine to make anything out clearly.

"Yep, not a damned thing." he said.

"I've got another signal. Ten metres dead ahead." Craig said suddenly and Holden turned to point his weapon along the vent instead of upwards, staring along the vent and bracing himself for whatever might come running at him out of the darkness. However, before he fired he saw the beams of two flash lights from around a junction and he relaxed, lowering his flame unit as Kenner and Moss appeared.

"Jesus corp, I almost roasted the pair of you." he said.

"Thanks for not doing that private." Kenner replied as he and Moss halted right in front of Holden, "Now what about that signal."

"It was the damned fan." Holden replied, "It's churning up the air and screwing up the trackers."

"Doesn't sound like it's working to me." Kenner said and all of a sudden Holden realised that the sound of the fan had stopped and he looked up.

"Oh-" he began when in the beam of his helmet mounted flash light he saw the alien warrior looking back down at him, perched in the vertical shaft just above the vent and using one of its hands to hold the fan still. Kenner and Moss both gasped as they looked up as well and Kenner started to raise his flamethrower. But before he could use the weapon the alien reached down between the blades of the fan with its free arm and dragged the marine up towards it, pulling him between the blades of the fan. Kenner screamed as the alien opened its jaws and then bit into his face, sending blood pouring down through the fan that started to move once again as soon as the alien withdrew its hand.

"Kill it!" Craig yelled at Holden and Moss as the pair watched in horror as Kenner was savaged by the alien.

"The corporal's in the way." Moss responded, all too aware that firing a flame unit indiscriminately up the vent would mean engulfing Kenner in fire as well as the alien.

"He's dead already." Holden exclaimed, realising the hopelessness of Kenner's situation and he prepared to fire his own weapon. But before he could do so Kenner lost his grip on his flame unit and the weapon fell into the blades of the fan where it became jammed. The fan continued to try and turn however and the angle at which the flamethrower had landed caused the fuel tank below it to break free and the thickened fuel that it held poured out as the tank itself dropped down the shaft towards the two marines directly below. But it was not this falling tank that killed them, instead it was the droplets of spilt fuel that rained down on the marines, especially onto Holden who had the gas fuelled ignition flame of his own flame unit running in readiness to use it. The moment that the first droplets of fuel met this flame they ignited to produce a blast of flame that consumed both Holden and Moss in an instant.

Seeing the fuel tank falling to the floor of the vent, Craig predicted what was about to happen and he swore as he rolled down a side path in the vent just moments before the ignition occurred. The flames also engulfed not only the fallen fuel tank from Kenner's weapon but also those loaded into the flame units carried by Holden and Moss and all three promptly exploded, sending out shrapnel in all directions as well as yet more flames created as the fuel inside burned uncontrollably.

Craig cried out in pain as some of the flames spread out enough on their way past the junction to flow down as far as him and the fabric of his trousers caught fire. Fortunately for him though his own flame unit remained safely away from the fire.

At the instant of the explosion the alien dropped the barely living Kenner and he fell down the shaft into the fan where he became caught in the blades before the flames flowed up towards him and engulfed him as

well. On the other hand the alien effortlessly scaled the shaft, retreating away from the fire and escaping into the darkness.

"Kenner can you read me?" Williams signalled, "Moss? Holden? Craig? Can anyone read me?" then when there was no response he tried contacting the Neille instead, "Captain Taylor can you tell me what's happening?" he asked, hoping that he would have seen everything on the multiple camera feeds. "It was above them." Taylor replied, shocked at what he had just witnessed, "It just reached out and dragged Kenner up the shaft."

"Taylor, are any of them still alive?" Williams asked.

"Err, I'm not sure. One of the flame units blew up but I think Craig was outside the blast. I'm not getting a feed from his camera but his bio status is still giving off a weak signal." Taylor told him.

"All units meet me in the hangar. We're going into the vents to get Craig. We'll go in together." Williams ordered.

The marines aboard the *Sulaco* rendezvoused in the vessel's hangar close to where the teams inside the vents had been ambushed by the alien and from here they entered the vents as well. Heading directly towards the location of the ambush the marines paused at each turn to study their motion trackers. The fan had stopped turning and there were no indications of any other activity.

"Private Craig!" Williams called out as the marines neared their destination, "Can you hear me?" but there was no response.

"Smell that?" Lawrence commented when they had gone a few metres further forwards and he sniffed the air. Williams glanced at him and nodded, recognising the scent of burnt flesh instantly.

"Anything on the tracker?" he asked, looking at Holmes and she checked her motion tracker again.

"Nothing sir." she replied and Williams advanced.

Rounding a corner he found himself facing a scene of horror, two totally burned and unidentifiable corpses lying beneath the vertical shaft while the remains of Kenner, identifiable only because Williams knew that it was him that had been dragged up the shaft hung from the shaft. Williams paused as he came to the vertical shaft, reluctant to look up it just in case the alien was waiting to strike again.

"Together?" Lawrence suggested and Williams nodded. The two marines aimed their flamethrowers up the shaft as they cautiously peered up it. Both marines relaxed when they saw that the alien was not waiting to leap down on them, but they became more tense when Cooper suddenly spoke.

"Movement dead ahead." he said softly and both Williams and Lawrence lowered their flamethrowers to direct them along the vent.

Then there came a groaning sound from further down the vent, just out of sight around a junction.

"Craig." Williams exclaimed and he hurried forwards until the injured marine came into view. Craig was obviously badly injured, his legs burned and blistered from the flames while the rest of his body was blackened from smoke. Craig groaned again and Williams crawled right up to him, "Craig, can you hear me?" he said, checking the injured man's pulse.

"We need to get him out of here." Lawrence said as he appeared at the junction behind Williams. Then he turned towards the other marines, "Come on, we'll have to carry him back to the hangar. We'll get a stretcher from the drop ship to get him back to the *Neille*."

Maddie looked up as the door to Williams' quarters opened and he walked in to find her lying on his bed studying a portable terminal.

"Did you kill it?" she asked.

"Haven't you been listening in?" Williams responded before he saw Maddie's headset on the floor beside his bed.

"No, I wanted to concentrate on this." Maddie said and she pointed to the terminal.

"Well Kenner, Moss and Holden are dead." Williams told her, "Craig's alive but barely. I need you to take a look at him."

"Where is he?" Maddie said, putting down the terminal and getting up off the bed.

"Lawrence and the others have taken him to the infirmary."

"I'm on it." Maddie replied and she hurried to the door, joining Williams before the pair of them started to make their way to the infirmary.

"So have you found anything out about these creatures?" Williams asked on the way.

"A little." Maddie answered, "I found a report relating to an incident back in the twenties. Are you familiar with LV four twenty-six?"

"Not really." Williams responded, shaking his head.

"It's also known as Archeron and is in the Zeta-two Reticuli system. In twenty-one-twenty-two a freighter called the *Nostramo* was ordered to land there. According to the sole survivor the crew discovered a derelict spacecraft of non-human origin that contained thousands of eggs. One of them hatched a creature that attached itself to the face of one of the crew. He was taken back aboard the freighter where another creature

burst out of his chest, killing him in the process. That creature then grew to be about seven or eight feet tall and went on a killing spree until the last crew member decided to set the freighter to self destruct and escaped in their shuttle. Can you guess what this survivor's name is?"

"Go on." Williams said.

"Ellen Ripley." Maddie said and Williams winced.

"She was an adviser to Bravo Team." he said, "They were sent to hunt for these things."

"My guess is they found them." Maddie replied, "Oh, one more thing."

"What? Do they breath fire as well as bleeding acid?"

"No. But they grow pretty quick. According to Ripley's report everything I've described took place within a twenty-four hour period."

"You're kidding me." Williams said in amazement, "How is that possible?"

"None of these things' biology makes sense captain. But it does make catching the one that hatched out of Chin a more pressing matter. It could be pretty big by now."

It was at this point that the pair entered the *Neille's* infirmary where they found the marines laying Craig out on one of the vacant beds.

"He's lost consciousness again" Lawrence said and Maddie nodded.

"So what am I dealing with exactly here?" she asked as she bent over the unconscious Craig and started to examine him.

"Burns and smoke inhalation mainly." Lawrence replied, "But he could be concussed from the explosion he was caught in."

"Okay, now go. I can deal with this." Maddie said, waving the marines away. Then as they were leaving she looked up, "Oh and captain?" she called out.

"Yes?" Williams responded.

"Don't think I've forgotten your promise to me." Maddie said, smiling and then she looked back down at Craig and got to work.

In the *Neille's* bridge Williams and Lawrence brought Taylor up to date with what they now knew.

"Do you really expect me to believe that?" Taylor said when Williams told him what Maddie had found in the *Sulaco's* mission logs, "A life form that can go from being a four foot long snake to an eight foot armoured killing machine in under a day?"

"I'm only telling you what Maddie told me." Williams replied.

"It does seem hard to believe." Lawrence added, "Not that I think Maddie would lie."

"But the survivor might." Taylor said, "Or just have been mistaken. Extreme emotional trauma can do strange things even to hardened combat veterans. Not to mention I bet that her employers didn't look too favourably on her blowing up a freighter. Covering up that would motivate a lot of people to lie."

"Well she was aboard the *Sulaco* as well. In fact she was one of the few that managed to get off." Williams pointed out.

"So where does this leave us then?" Taylor asked, "You've still not caught the creature loose aboard the *Sulaco* and now we have one here as well that could be God knows how big by now."

Williams drew in breath as he considered this.

"I'm not sending my people back into the vents." he answered, "If it is using them to move around the *Sulaco* then it obviously feels at home in them and the risk of more ambushes is too great. I want to turn the tables, lay a trap for it and draw it in."

"You think you can coax it out of the ventilation system? How?"

"By offering it something it obviously wants." Williams replied, "Prey."

"Prey?" Taylor commented.

"It's a predator." Lawrence said, "It had obviously made a nest in the base of the *Sulaco's* IR masking tower but it came out of it to hunt and there's nothing else around to hunt except for us."

"I'd rather not have to wait until the one aboard the *Neille* is big enough to start hunting us back." Taylor said,

"Do you have a plan for dealing with that one more quickly?"

"Only to have Farrow and Michaels keep searching for it." Williams said, "I wouldn't be surprised if it headed for the *Neille's* ventilation system as well. But they should avoid entering the vents themselves. I'd recommend shutting the system down temporarily and sealing all the hatches. Then have Farrow and Michaels check each section in turn with a motion tracker from an access point. It ought to be pretty easy to deal with once you've got it trapped. Also consider potential food sources. It must need to eat if it wants to grow and my people found the food stores aboard the *Sulaco* trashed."

"Okay, I'll override the atmospheric recycling for a few hours. But if we start to get CO-two alarms then I'm going to have to open the vents again." Taylor said.

"Agreed. I'll be taking a party back aboard the *Sulaco* as soon as I've come up with a plan to trap the alien over there so that ought to increase the amount of time before the air goes toxic." Williams said before he turned to leave.

"So do you have any idea what we're going to do to trap this thing captain?" Lawrence asked when he and Williams left the *Neille's* bridge and its door closed behind them.

"Partially." Williams said, "Obviously we need to set up a kill zone but the trick is going to be to get the alien into it without getting killed in the process. I'd also like to try and pick somewhere that we don't need to worry about its acid blood eating right the way through the hull."

"Hypersleep compartment?" Lawrence suggested, "We already know that they can bleed in there without melting a hole in the hull."

"Perhaps. But we also know that the wiring under the floor can get short circuited and start a fire." Williams reminded him, "Though we do need to stop by there anyway. If those containers do contain more eggs then I want them destroyed before they hatch." and Lawrence smiled, "What?" Williams asked him.

"How protective of their young do you suppose this species is?" Lawrence responded and Williams smiled as well.

"You're thinking that we place the eggs in danger and see if the alien comes to help them?" he said, "I think it's worth a shot. If we can do it without using up all of the remaining eggs then we may be able to use the same trick here on the *Neille* to deal with the second creature if it hasn't already been caught by then."

"We still need a way of letting the alien know that the eggs are in danger." Lawrence pointed out.

"I'm hoping it has a pretty good sense of smell." Williams said, "We'll place one or two of the eggs at intakes to the ventilation system and use flame units to set fire to them. With any luck the smell will draw the alien in close enough for us to deal with it. I still want to try and catch it away from the hull though. I'd rather use pulse rifles against it than flame units, their range is just too limited and frankly one accident with one is too many."

"I'll go let the troops know." Lawrence said, "I'll have them draw a pulse rifle each and keep one flame unit per pair." and Williams nodded.

"That sounds about right. I'm going to study the *Sulaco's* schematics. I want to know the best places to set our traps." he said.

12.

Being more familiar with the layout of the Valley Forge-class ship, Michaels led the way through its innards while Farrow followed him with a motion tracker. The tracker had not picked up any movement that could not be accounted for yet and so the pair were basing their search off the direction that the chestburster had been seen heading in when it had fled from the air lock. This had brought the pair to the weapons bays at the front of the *Neille* where the ship's missiles were stored. The racks holding these weapons extended far up above the heads of the search party as well as below their feet as they stood in the doorway to the compartment and looked around.

"We'll have to turn back." Michaels said, "If it is in here then there's nothing we can do about it right now. One blast from these flame units and we risk triggering the missiles."

"Oh great." Farrow replied. Then she looked along the walkway that crossed the compartment to where a second doorway was located at the far end, "What's over there?" she asked.

"The targeting radar." Michaels replied.

"So if it is in there we can use our flame units, right?" Farrow said.

"Sure, providing we're careful. Follow me." Michaels answered and he started to walk across the walkway. His attention focused on the doorway at the far end his was not looking down at all and so did not notice anything unusual about the walkway itself until he felt something soft under his feet and he paused to look down.

"What the hell is this?" he said, bending down to peel off the strange rubbery material stuck to the bottom of one of his boots.

"Careful with that!" Farrow exclaimed when she saw it and recognised the vague shape of the chestburster's head in the discarded skin, "I think it's from that thing. It looks like it's shedding its skin as it grows or something."

"It's okay, it hasn't melted my boot or the walkway." Michaels said and he held up the skin and frowned, "So if it's shed this then it must already be growing. So how big is it now?" he added. However, before Farrow could offer an answer her motion tracker came to life.

"I've got movement." she hissed.

"Where?" Michaels asked, looking around nervously in the room where using their weapons could lead to the destruction of the entire ship.

"Up there. Look." Farrow hissed, staring at one of the racks of missiles above them. The beam from her flash light could barely reach this part of the compartment but it provided just enough illumination that she and Michaels could make out the shape of the alien as it crawled along one of the forty metre long Long Lance missiles. But whereas the last time the creature had been seen it was little more than a four foot long snake now it had developed into a tailed humanoid creature that stood at least as tall as a man. Obviously not yet fully grown, the alien's head extended backwards in the same way as the older creature's aboard the *Sulaco* did, but rather than being heavily ridged it was smooth along its entire length.

"Good God! It's huge." Michaels said. Then he saw Farrow raise her flame unit, "No!" he snapped and he knocked the weapon aside, "You'll trigger the missiles."

His sudden outburst attracted the alien's attention and it halted and turned towards the pair standing on the walkway. The alien hissed, seemingly glaring at Farrow and Michaels. Then all of a sudden it turned and bounded along the missile, vanishing into the shadows.

"Captain Taylor, are you seeing this?" Michaels asked.

"Not clearly. What's going on down there sergeant?" Taylor responded from the bridge.

"The alien is heading towards the stern from the missile room captain." Michaels told him, "I don't now how but it's grown. It's bigger than a man now. If you seal everything from frame six we should have it trapped up here."

"Copy that sergeant, sealing all hatches at frame six." Taylor replied and he turned away from the camera feeds, rushing to another console where he hurried to seal all of the hatches just to the rear of the missile room.

Meanwhile having escaped from the missile room by leaping into an inspection shaft meant for providing the crew with direct access to the *Neille's* stored missiles, the alien ran all the way down this until it emerged into a corridor and then continued to head away from the missile room. Ahead of it, the alien could hear the sound of a heavy door rolling shut and it raced to try and beat this. But just before it could escape through the narrowing gap the door slammed shut, trapping the alien. Screeching in anger, the alien charged the door anyway to try and beat it down. However, the door proved too resilient and when it heard the sound of Farrow and Michaels approaching the alien ran off down a side corridor.

"It must have come out around here somewhere." Michaels said, "The only way out of that room was down

one of the inspection shafts and they all lead to this corridor.”

“Well wherever it is, it’s not showing up on the tracker any more.” Farrow said, turning from side to side as she scanned for any signs of movement, “Nice work on trapping us in here with it by the way. That was a really great plan.”

Cooper pushed the cart through the *Sulaco*'s corridors while the other marines formed a ring around him. “Okay this is the first one.” Williams said as they came to a hatchway that gave access to part of the ship's life support system. Here air was drawn out of the corridors and forced through filters that would scrub out most of the carbon dioxide before forcing the relatively clean air into the vents to establish a flow that would reintroduce oxygen into it. There were several places such as this scattered around the *Sulaco* and it was Williams' plan to deposit a pair of eggs at four of them, still inside their containers and the access hatches opened. The containers would then be opened and flame units used to set fire to the contents before they could hatch. Any chemicals released from this would automatically be drawn into the vent where it was hoped that the scent would attract the attention of the alien and draw it out of the ventilation system where the marines would lead it to a location considered safe for them to engage it from. Should the alien fail to appear then the process would be repeated at another access point until either it did make an appearance or the marines ran out of eggs to burn.

Two of the remaining eight containers were unloaded carefully from the cart and placed beside the hatch but for now all of them remained closed.

“Okay that’s it for this one.” Williams added when this was done, “Now I want the rest of these things placed at the access points in the hangar, by the infirmary and the galley. Gunnery Sergeant Lawrence and I are heading for the mess hall, that’s where we’ll set up our killing zone. It’s big enough for us to set up what we need and give us a good field of fire while not having any critical systems running behind any of its walls or floor. When everything’s set I want you to meet us there.”

“Yes captain.” Baker responded. Then she looked at the other marines, “Well?” she said sternly, “What are you lot waiting for? We’ve got a job to do and the quicker it’s done the quicker we can all go home. Now move!”

Leaving the other marines to continue with their task, Williams and Lawrence headed for the *Sulaco*'s mess hall.

“You really think that flooding this place will work?” Lawrence asked as they stood in the doorway and studied the room.

“It ought to.” Williams replied, “Shooting the alien is bound to cause it to bleed and the water should dilute the acid before it can eat through the deck. At the very least it’ll weaken it.”

“Yeah and we’ll also send a whole of water flooding down through the hole as well.” Lawrence commented.

“Which is why we’re doing this far away from the reactor fuel.” Williams replied. Then he pointed across the room, “We’ll move all the furniture right up against that wall.” he explained, “Then we’ll set up all of our robot sentries in a line across the room and restrict their firing angle and range to the area right around here.”

“Robot sentries? I thought we’d be taking this thing out with rifles.”

“This plan relies on being able to outrun a predatory alien all the way to here. I hate to be a pessimist but what if we’re too slow? Sealing the corridors behind the alien so that it has to come this way will force it into the sentries' line of fire even if it kills all of us first. Our IFF transmitters will let us run right past the guns but as soon as they pick up the alien they’ll tear it apart.”

“Isn’t that the truth? Four smart guns firing in unison.” Lawrence commented, “So who gets to be bait?”

“All of us.” Williams said, “Each of us will draw it a short distance further away from the vents before ducking out of sight and sealing a door behind us. The next person will already be set up further down the corridor to draw the alien on and repeat the process until it ends up here. The only other thing we need to get sorted is building the pool we’ll use to hold the water.”

“We could wall of an area with empty ammo boxes.” Lawrence said, “Then grab a tent out of stores and use it as a liner to hold the water.”

“Should work.” Williams said, nodding in agreement with the suggestion, “They’re designed to resist tropical downpours so one ought to hold a foot or so of water.”

Farrow checked the motion tracker again when she and Michaels reached the *Neille*'s forward sensor assembly. The corridors here were narrow and clusters of cables and coolant ducts lined the walls to give them an uneven appearance. The amount of power being consumed by the equipment in this section of the ship gave it a higher temperature than the places where the crew would be expected to spend most of their time and Michaels and Farrow could feel the difference on their skin. An earlier reading on the motion tracker had suggested that the alien had been here and they hurried to reach it before it escaped. However, the tracker no longer read anything other than the two marines themselves.

“Missed it.” she said, “Again.”

“Perhaps.” Michaels replied, “But I think it could be thinking of nesting here. Look.” and he walked up to a

nearby hatchway. Normally kept closed, the hatch had been dragged open to expose the emergency escape vehicle on the other side. But what had attracted Michaels' attention more than this was the discarded alien skin he noticed in the doorway itself. Holding his flamethrower out in front of him just in case the alien was hiding undetected inside the EEV, Michaels leant through the hatch to see if there were any clues as to what the alien had gained by deciding to force its way inside. The answer to this question was obvious the moment Michaels leant through the hatch. The EEV was designed to carry up to five people to safety from the Neille should it suffer catastrophic damage. Even though this particular example was not located anywhere near the Neille's hypersleep compartment, it still possessed all of the necessary fittings for transporting its passengers in them. However, the designers had known that this would not always be the case and as such provision had been made for transporting passengers who were not in stasis and this required that the EEV be equipped with a full life support system of its own. This included a supply of food sufficient to keep the passengers alive long enough to be rescued, something that could take several weeks. Therefore, the food that the EEV was stocked with was selected, if not for being particularly appetising, for getting the maximum amount of sustenance into the minimum possible volume. Having somehow sensed this, the alien had broken into the EEV to get at the food stored there, obviously using it to fuel its rapid growth. In the process of stealing the food the alien had also torn open several panels and ripped out the circuitry concealed behind them. Though the extent of the damage was not certain from a brief visual inspection it appeared to Michaels that this particular EEV would no longer function.

"Well now we know how it got so big. The last time the pod was restocked some trace of the rations must have been left in the hatch or something." Michaels said and he stood aside so that Farrow could see the mess that the alien had left behind it.

Farrow snorted.

"I don't know why they bother." she commented, "From what I hear that stuff's as vile when it's fresh as it is when it's a decade out of date." then a smile spread across her face.

"What?" Michaels asked.

"Are there any more lifeboats in this part of the ship?" she asked.

"Sure. There's one near the dorsal missile doors. Plus another down near the atmospheric recyclers."

"So since this thing obviously likes the rations in them, why don't we go and open them up?" Farrow said and Michaels smiled as well when he realised what she was suggesting.

"We lure it into a lifeboat and then when it takes the bait we launch the thing into space." he said and Farrow nodded.

"One quick blast from a laser turret later and the job's done." she said, "But we'll need a way of determining when the alien's inside the lifeboat."

"Easy. We just leave a headset inside it. The camera feed will tell the captain when he needs to override the lifeboat controls and launch it. Plus it means we can get out of here and just sit and wait for it all to be over."

Michaels said before adding, "Captain, did you copy all of that?"

"Affirmative sergeant, I'll release the hatch to the ventral EEV now, it's the closest one to your position."

Taylor replied and Michaels nodded.

"This way." he said to Farrow, waving her in the direction of the other EEV.

The hatchway to this EEV was still closed when it came into view but as soon as Taylor saw on the camera feeds that the search team was nearing it he opened it remotely from the bridge. Entering the EEV Michaels and Farrow headed straight for the store of emergency rations and opened it. Then, with their weapons slung over their shoulders they began to unwrap the rations from their sealed packets and dropped them to the floor.

"I say we dump about half of them in here." Michaels said.

"What and use the rest to lay a trail?" Farrow asked and Michaels nodded.

"Spreading them around can't hurt." he answered, "Otherwise this could take ages."

Scenting food in the air close by the alien closed in on the source and as it drew nearer it heard noises. Pausing, the alien extended its inner jaws, hissing as it tasted the air. Then it broke into a run heading straight for the open hatchway leading to the EEV where Michaels and Farrow were still unwrapping rations.

In her haste to open as many of the ration packets as possible Farrow had taken her attention off her motion tracker that now rested on a nearby acceleration couch. But when she noticed a brief ping from the device she whirled around.

"Crap." she hissed, "It's coming."

"Let's go." Michaels responded, pulling his headset off and placing it where it covered the open hatchway before he rushed towards it ahead of Farrow. But right as he reached the hatchway he suddenly found himself confronted by the alien staring right at him from the corridor outside, "Holy-" he began before the alien lashed out with its arm, tearing open Michaels' chest and hurling him back across the interior of the EEV in the process.

Farrow screamed as the alien burst into the EEV and then lunged towards her. The impact knocked her to the floor of the EEV where the alien pinned her beneath it as it struck at her throat, using its inner jaws to tear a hole in it before bringing its head down to start biting much larger lumps of flesh from her. Dazed and bleeding heavily, Michaels looked up to see the alien in the process of devouring Farrow alive and in that instant he knew that neither of them was going to get out of the EEV alive. Then he looked up and saw the solution on the wall above him. With the last of his energy Michaels struck at the wall twice. The first blow broke open the transparent cover set into the wall before he slammed his hand down on the prominent red button that had been behind it.

“Launch countdown initiated.” a computerised voice announced, “You have thirty seconds to secure yourself. The option to override launch expires in twenty-five seconds.”

At the same time the EEV's hatch began to slide closed and this attracted the alien's attention, causing it to break off from attacking Farrow and turn towards the hatchway. Sensing that it was about to be trapped the alien leapt towards the hatch, making it there just in time to wedge its hands in the gap between the door and the frame. The hatch's motor strained as the alien pushed it open wide enough to be able to fit through and then darted through just as the computer announced that there were only ten seconds left to override the launch. But as the alien passed through the hatchway the hatch slammed shut behind it, trapping its tail in the process.

The alien screeched as it struggled to free itself while the EEV hatch as well as the hatch that would seal the opening created in the lower hull of the *Neille* when it was launched crushed its tail. The continued pressure soon reached a point where it was strong enough to break the alien's exoskeleton and there was a cracking sound as one of the alien's tail segments was crushed. In the process the acidic fluid contained in the alien's internal body tissue spurted out and immediately began to melt both hatches. This created a hole that allowed the alien to pull its tail free before rushing off down the corridor, still dripping acid from its tail onto the deck as it ran.

“The option to override launch has expired.” the computerised voice announced, despite there being no-one left alive inside the EEV to hear it, “Launch in T-minus five seconds. Four. Three. Two. One.”

The EEV shot away from the *Neille*, propelled by the explosive bolts that had been all that held it in place after the clamps were retracted at T-minus five seconds. Before it could reach a safe distance from the *Neille* to trigger its own propulsion system all of the air was sucked out of the EEV, along with anything unsecured and small enough to pass through the hole melted in its hatch by the acid from alien's tail. But there was more to come as the acid had continued to eat away at the EEV, melting its way into the fuel tank as well as the wiring and when the time came to fire the EEV's engines the tiny vessel simply exploded.

Back on the *Neille* air began to rush out through the hole burned in the EEV access hatch and klaxons sounded to alert the crew to the damage. The response to this was automatic and doors began to seal at strategic points to seal off the damaged section. The fleeing alien saw one of these starting to close ahead of it and rushed forwards, narrowly making it through the gap before the door slammed shut behind it and the rush of air passing over it stopped.

Enraged at almost being trapped the alien continued through the *Neille*'s corridors until it came to another sealed door, this one one of the doors closed to limit the alien's movement. Screeching, the alien lashed out with its tail and struck the door repeatedly. The physical impact of each blow was insufficient to inflict any damage to the armoured pressure door but the wound to its tail was still bleeding and with each strike more acid was splashed against the barrier, creating a hole that expanded to become just large enough to permit the alien to squeeze through it and escape into the open sections of the *Neille*.

13.

"They're gone." Taylor said having been forced to watch helplessly as yet more people died at the hands of an alien. Worse yet the feed from Michaels' camera had continued right up until the moment it was sucked out of the EEV before being destroyed in its explosion. This had enabled Taylor to witness the alien escaping just seconds before it could be ejected from the *Neille*, "What's our status?" he asked, looking at Kraven.

"There was a pressure leak next to the lifeboat captain. But it looks like the emergency systems kicked in just as they were supposed to. The doors dropped into place and we're not measuring any further loss."

"Is the ship still secure forward of frame six?" Taylor said and Kraven checked his console.

"I'm still reading all doors closed sir." he replied, "But apart from that I can't say. We'd need to check every one manually to be sure."

"Williams are you there?" Taylor signalled.

"Right here." Williams replied.

"Michaels and Farrow are dead." Taylor told him, "They tried to lay a trap for the alien over here and it went wrong. The *Neille's* damaged but it's not bad. But I'm going to need a couple of your men to check out the doors keeping that thing at the front of the ship."

"We're just setting up over here." Williams said, "But we need to come back to fetch our robot sentries anyway. We'll do a full sweep of the doors when we do. Then once we've dealt with the alien aboard the *Sulaco* we'll take care of the one aboard the *Neille*. Is that okay?"

"That should be fine." Taylor answered, "Just hurry. The longer that thing's aboard my ship the worse I feel."

The alien moved cautiously through the *Neille's* corridors. The air contained the scent of prey but it was faint, indicating that the prey was far away. Having almost been caught in a trap once already the alien was now alert for any further signs of an ambush and so obvious indicators of nearby food were ignored as the alien passed right by the ship's galley and main food stores as it sought out safer prey.

Taylor crossed the bridge to the emergency arms locker and used his identity card to release the security seal.

"Captain, what are you doing?" Kraven asked as Taylor opened the locker to reveal the four pistols and single pulse rifle kept inside the locker just in case the bridge crew needed to defend themselves but were unable to get to the vessel's armoury.

"I'll tell you what I'm not doing airman," Taylor responded, "and that's taking any chances. We know that alien managed to get off the lifeboat before it was launched but that's all. If it's not still trapped in the forward section of the ship I don't want to be caught defenceless." he then removed and loaded one of the pistols, along with a holster that he strapped around his waist. Taking a second pistol with a belt and three magazines of ammunition from the locker he took them to where Kraven sat and placed them beside him. The crewman nodded as he prepared the pistol for use and strapped it around his own waist while Taylor returned to the arms locker to take out the pulse rifle, loading one of the magazines of ammunition into it. Though the weapon was fitted with the standard thirty-millimetre pump action grenade launcher beneath the main barrel there were no grenades kept in the arms locker. Using such weapons anywhere near the bridge was likely to do more harm than good to the ship's crew, regardless of the circumstances. Inserting the magazine into the pulse rifle, Taylor saw the ammunition counter on the side light up '95' and smiled. Then he chambered a round, made sure that the safety catch was engaged and slung the weapon over his shoulder.

The alien entered a section of the *Neille* where the scent of prey was strong, indicating that this was somewhere that they frequented often. Rather than retreat into the air vents, the alien chose to remain in the more spacious corridors as it followed the trails left by the ship's crew. There were signposts at numerous points on the walls of the *Neille* but these meant nothing to the alien and it ignored them as it headed in the same direction as the signs pointing to the bridge were pointed in. This led the alien to the door to the bridge and it came to a halt. The door was closed but the scent trails it had followed led right to this point before disappearing through the door. The alien was about to try attacking the door, using its claws to pry it open just as it had done to access the EEV and its food stores. But then its attention was attracted towards the illuminated control panel beside the door. This featured a pair of brightly coloured push buttons for opening and closing the door and the alien leant in for a closer look. As it did so the alien scented the traces of its prey on the buttons, deposited there each time someone opened or closed the door from outside the bridge and the alien hissed. Then it opened its mouth and the secondary set of jaws inside shot out.

The jaws struck the control to open the bridge door and it promptly slid sideways to reveal the bridge and the two USASF personnel inside. Kraven was sat with his back to the door while Taylor was stood in front of the

displays showing the marines' camera feeds coming from the *Sulaco*. Once more the alien let out a hiss before it leapt through the open doorway into the bridge.

"It's here!" Taylor snapped as he noticed the door open and spotted the alien right as it leapt towards him. At the same time Taylor reached for the pulse rifle on his back, sliding the sling down his arm as tried to bring the weapon to bear on the alien. But the alien moved far too quickly for him to be able to take aim and it flung him aside, sending him crashing into the arrayed displays of camera feeds as it charged towards Kraven instead.

At Taylor's warning, Kraven turned his chair around and reached for the pistol holstered at his waist. But as he brought the weapon to bear on the fast moving alien his arm was knocked aside by a swing of the alien's tail before he could open fire and the pistol flew from his grasp. Kraven turned his chair again as he tried to stand up to retrieve the pistol but by this point the alien was right in front of him and it slammed right into him, sending him sprawling back across the console behind him. Kraven screamed briefly as the alien pounced on top of him before striking at him with its secondary jaws, punching a hole right through his forehead. From behind it, the alien heard Taylor moving as he reached to pick up his pulse rifle and the alien leapt off the console. As soon as the alien's weight was no longer holding Kraven's body in place the corpse slid down the sloping console and dropped to the floor. As he fell his arm struck the flight control column, knocking it aside and firing the *Neille's* main sub light engines.

The initial effect of this was barely perceptible from inside the *Neille*, its inertial dampening system activating to compensate for the backwards drag that this would otherwise create. However, outside the ship was a much different matter. Though the *Neille* and the *Sulaco* were tethered together by the umbilical corridor that stretched between their air locks firing the *Neille's* engines did not affect the motion of the *Sulaco* to the same degree and this created enough of a shearing force between the two vessels to rip the umbilical corridor free, exposing the *Sulaco's* open air lock to space. More significant than this however, was the fact that the unconventional method by which the *Neille's* rocket engines had been triggered had set it on a random vector and this steered the ship sharply towards the *Sulaco*.

Fortunately the *Neille* had not had the chance to build up much speed by the time it slammed into the side of the *Sulaco* but both vessels still lurched violently under the impact. The inertial dampening of the *Neille* was not designed to compensate for forces other than acceleration due to the firing of the engines and so the sudden motion of the impact sent the occupants of the ship flying.

In the bridge of the *Neille* this meant that Taylor slid across the floor while the alien tumbled behind a console, out of his line of sight as he tried to aim his pulse rifle at it. He did however, fire a short burst just as the alien disappeared from sight and the armour piercing rounds embedded themselves into the wall behind the alien before exploding and showering glass and other fragments from the displays over the floor. Then the alien leapt over the console between it and Taylor, screeching as it descended towards him. Instinctively Taylor aimed his pulse rifle upwards and fired it again. This time there was no sudden lurching motion of the *Neille* to spoil his aim and the alien could not attempt to dodge the burst of gunfire in mid air so the rounds struck the alien in its torso. Even though it was not as fully developed as the specimen aboard the *Sulaco*, the alien aboard the *Neille* had already developed an armoured torso but this was insufficient to protect it against pulse rifle rounds fired from point blank range and each bullet pierced the alien's exoskeleton before exploding inside its body. The alien emitted a high pitched screech as it died, but even dead it was still dangerous and Taylor also cried out in agony as he was showered with the alien's highly corrosive blood. This burned at his chest, throat and face, eating away at his flesh and blinding him in mere seconds. Soon after that the acid burned through his ribs into his chest cavity and Taylor's suffering was finally brought to an end just as the alien's corpse landed on top of his.

The acid seeping out of the alien continued to eat away at what remained of Taylor and also through the floor of the bridge, reaching the densely packed wiring that ran beneath it and seconds later there was a brief series of sparks before a blast of flame erupted from under the floor and the entire bridge was consumed in fire.

In the *Neille's* infirmary Maddie looked up from treating Craig's burns the moment that the vessel's engines were fired, being able to sense the acceleration as the ship got underway. Having been told nothing about the ship separating from the *Sulaco* she was just about to make her way to the intercom to find out what was going on when the two ships collided and was thrown forwards across Craig and she grabbed hold of the unconscious marine to prevent him from falling from the bed as a klaxon sounded.

"What the hell is going on?" she exclaimed and she ran for the intercom, "Captain Taylor, what's happening?" she asked but there was no reply, "Taylor? Kraven? Are either of you there?" with no response forthcoming Maddie then hurried to a computer console and used it to access the status of the flight controls. But all that told her was that the *Neille's* engines were still being fired, taking it in a steady arc. Then another klaxon sounded and red lights began to flash throughout the ship, accompanied by the voice of the *Neille's* computer.

"Danger. Fire in bridge. All personnel must abandon ship immediately."

"Oh no." Maddie said and she looked down at Craig. The marine was obviously in no state to travel but there was an alternative solution at hand. The *Neille's* infirmary was equipped with several hypersleep chambers to be used to keep badly injured patients alive long enough for them to reach a better equipped medical facility and as was the case with the chambers in the *Neille's* main hypersleep compartment these could be loaded aboard one of the ship's EEVs.

As quickly as she could, Maddie picked up Craig's unconscious form and carried it over to the nearest of the hypersleep chambers before setting him down inside it and then activating the mechanism. As soon as the *Neille's* computer detected the activated hypersleep chamber it engaged the system to transfer it to the closest EEV, located just a few metres away from the infirmary. Meanwhile Maddie did not wait to watch as the hypersleep chamber was retracted into the wall. Instead she ran from the infirmary and made her own way towards the EEV, making it there just as the hypersleep chamber was loaded and locked into position. Maddie rushed to an acceleration couch and struck the EEV's launch button, smashing through the glass cover and pushing the button with a single blow before she began to strap herself in.

"Launch countdown initiated. You have thirty seconds to secure yourself. The option to override launch expires in twenty-five seconds." the computer announced.

Maddie pulled her harness tight and then leant back in her seat, pressing the back of her head into the thick padding and waiting for the countdown being announced by the computer to reach zero.

"The option to override launch has expired." the computerised voice said after the twenty-five seconds had elapsed and Maddie felt the retaining clamps disengage from the EEV, "Launch in T-minus five seconds. Four. Three. Two. One."

The EEV then shook as it was ejected from the *Neille* and Maddie felt herself being pressed into the padding of the acceleration couch when its engine ignited a few seconds later. Immediately the EEV's computer began to scan for a safe destination to head for and the first beacon it detected was the transponder of the nearby *Sulaco*.

"Beacon detected. *USS Sulaco*. Setting course for intercept." the computer said and Maddie smiled as the EEV changed course to head for the nearby vessel as the *Neille* continued to accelerate away uncontrollably.

Aboard the *Sulaco* the first indication that something was wrong was when an alarm sounded to alert the occupants to the decompression of part of the ship.

"Decompression alarm! What the hell is going on?" Lawrence said. He and Williams were in the *Sulaco's* armoury emptying out ammunition containers so that they could be used to build a small wall for their planned trap without having to worry about the potential effects of the alien's acidic blood coming into contact with the volatile chemicals used in the ammunition.

"We need to-" Williams began before all of a sudden the entire ship lurched violently and there was a grinding sound as the *Neille's* hull scraped against the *Sulaco's*.

All around the armoury, weapons and ammunition fell from the cabinets that had been opened for Williams and Lawrence to access them. Fortunately none of the munitions were armed and there was no danger of any of it detonating but both marines found themselves being buffeted by the falling equipment.

"The bridge." Williams said when the movement finally stopped, "We need to get to the bridge to find out what's going on."

At the same time as Williams and Lawrence were leaving the armoury to make their way to the bridge the other marines aboard the *Sulaco* were picking themselves up in the corridor outside the last of the access hatches where they had been told to place a pair of the alien eggs.

"Are those containers secure?" Baker asked as she pulled herself back to her feet, "The last thing we need is any of these things hatching out."

"They're both secure sarge." Holmes replied, quickly inspecting the two containers and seeing that they were still sealed.

"Okay we need to check the others." Baker said, "Aston, Holmes, go and check on them. If any of the containers show signs of having been broken open check in but do not, I repeat do not, approach them."

"Yes sarge." Aston responded before he and Holmes set off down the corridor while Baker and Cooper remained behind to set up the last two eggs.

Unsurprisingly the containers holding the eggs had been thrown across the corridors they were placed in, leaving them lying on their sides when Aston and Holmes found them. The first set merely needed standing upright again but when the two marines reached the next set they ground to a sudden halt several metres away when they saw that as well as falling over and being flung across the corridor one of the containers had burst open. But worse than that was the fact that the violent motion had caused the egg it contained to fall out and it too had opened.

"Tracker!" Aston hissed as he raised his pulse rifle and looked around, hunting for the alien facehugger that he knew had to be loose somewhere, "Err, we've got a situation outside the infirmary." he transmitted while

searching for the creature, "One of the eggs down here has hatched."

"Has anyone been attacked?" Williams' voice responded when he heard this.

"Negative captain. But I can't see the thing that hatched out of it. Holmes is checking the tracker now."

"Cooper and I are on our way to back them up now captain." Baker added.

"Understood. But be careful. Gunnery Sergeant Lawrence and I have just reached the bridge, we'll find out what's going on and let you all know as soon as we can."

Rushing into the *Sulaco's* bridge, Williams sat at the command position and immediately called up a system status report.

"Well at least we know why the decompression alarm sounded but what the hell's happened to the *Neille*?" Lawrence said when the main sensor display showed that the USASF vessel was now powering away from the *Sulaco*.

"All I can tell from here is that her sub-light engines are on a continuous burn. The impact we felt was when the *Neille* slammed into the side of us." Williams said.

"Are we holed?" Lawrence asked and Williams shook his head.

"I don't think so." he answered, "The alarm was just warning us about the air lock suddenly being open to space when the umbilical was ripped apart. But it looks like the computer took care of that automatically just like it should. The impact was towards the front of the ship. It looks like some of the secondary sensors aren't sending any data but there's nothing that I can see that will make the ship unflyable." then his face fell, "The *Neille*, she's on fire." he said and he called up the feed from an external camera that showed the *Neille* trailing flames behind it as the damaged vessel accelerated.

"What about the crew?" Lawrence said.

"*Neille* this is *Sulaco*, do you read me?" Williams said, activating the *Sulaco's* ship to ship communications but in return there was only static, "Maddie respond." he added, well aware that the android had been aboard the other ship.

"If she's still aboard-" Lawrence began.

"Hello? Is anyone there?" Maddie's voice interrupted and both Williams and Lawrence breathed a sigh of relief.

"Maddie, what's going on over there?" Williams asked.

"I've no idea captain. All I know is that something happened on the bridge that set off the *Neille's* engines. Then the fire alarm went off and the computer gave the order to abandon ship." Maddie explained.

"Then get to a lifeboat." Williams told her.

"Check your radar captain. I should be visible by now." Maddie replied and Williams switched the main display away from the visual feed and back to the *Sulaco's* radar tracking which clearly showed a second nearby signal emitting a USASF transponder signal.

"Okay we've got you on track Maddie." Williams said, "Is anyone else with you?"

"Just Craig captain. His injuries are severe so I had to put him in a hypersleep chamber to make sure he survived the ejection process. As far as I know Captain Taylor and Kraven were both on the bridge when everything started and I wasn't able to contact either of them so I'm assuming they're dead." Maddie said before she suddenly added, "Now how about you let me aboard the *Sulaco*?"

"Confirmed Maddie. Initiating recovery procedures." Williams replied as he gave the order for the *Sulaco's* computer to recover the EEV heading towards the ship.

The alien warrior was taken by surprise just as much as the human occupants of the *Sulaco* when the *Neille* collided with it and it hissed as it was slammed against the wall of the vent it was hiding in. Suspecting an attack the alien paused to take in its surroundings but it detected no signs that there was anyone in the vent with it.

But there was a faint chemical trace in the air that tugged at the alien on an instinctive level. It was the pheromone given off when an egg opened and it told the alien that prey had approached close enough to one to cause it to react. The alien's instincts told it that it had to protect the embryonic alien that the facehugger would implant in a victim until it could hatch and with this in mind the alien began to follow the trail of pheromones through the vent to their source.

Unaware that the *Sulaco* was now operating under power Aston and Holmes continued their search for the missing alien facehugger. The two marines had not moved since discovering that the egg had hatched and Holmes continued to scan for movement.

"Anything yet?" Aston asked.

"Not a God damned thing." Holmes replied, "That thing could be half way across the ship by now."

All of a sudden the facehugger dropped down from the ceiling directly above the marines and Holmes shrieked as it landed on top of her while her attention was focused on the motion tracker. Dropping the tracker to the floor Holmes was able to lift her hands up to her face in time to prevent the facehugger from

wrapping its legs around her head, holding it mere inches away from her face. Falling backwards, she screamed when she saw the orifice in the underside of the facehugger open and the snakelike proboscis emerged as the facehugger tried to force it down her throat.

Aston cursed as he slung his rifle and reached out to help Holmes, grabbing hold of the facehugger's body and trying to pull it away from the other marine. But by this stage the facehugger had already wrapped its long tail around Holmes' neck and in reaction her trying to fight it off was tightening its grip, intending to incapacitate her by preventing her from breathing freely. Seeing this Aston took hold of the base of the facehugger's tail and squeezed it as hard as he could, hoping that this would cause the creature to slacken its grip. But the attack had the opposite effect and it tightened its tail around Holmes' throat instead.

In desperation Aston reached for his knife and he held its blade to the facehugger's tail.

"Roll over!" he yelled at Holmes, wanting to get the facehugger beneath her so that the acidic blood would not get on either of them when he cut through the tail.

Aston then pressed the knife into the facehugger's flesh, hoping that the blade would survive long enough to cut through the tail or at least do enough damage to cause the facehugger to release its grip on Holmes. But once again the result was not what Aston had intended and the facehugger reacted to having its tail cut open by suddenly contracting its grip around Holmes' throat and there was a 'crunch' as her neck was snapped, at which point she went instantly limp. At the same time the blood that came out of the wound did so with a spurt that Aston had not counted on and it splashed over the back of his hand, causing him to cry out in pain as the powerfully corrosive liquid began to eat away at his flesh.

Staggering back, Aston instinctively clamped his other hand over the wound and this brought the acid into contact with this as well and he looked in horror at both of his hands as they began to dissolve. It was only then that he became aware of the shadow that had fallen over him and he turned his head and looked up right into the face of the alien warrior that had been drawn out of the vent by the commotion and the pheromones released when the egg hatched. Aston let out a brief gasp before the alien struck, using its inner jaws to pierce his forehead just below the rim of his helmet and he dropped to the floor in a bloody heap.

Then the alien heard the sound of rapid footfalls and it spun around.

"Aston! Holmes!" Baker called out and just as she and Cooper appeared around the corner the alien warrior leapt back into the vent and vanished before either of the approaching marines could open fire, "Christ!" Baker exclaimed when she saw the scene left in the alien's wake. Holmes was lying on her back with her head at an angle while Aston was in a heap in the middle of the corridor in a growing pool of blood that was flowing from the wounds inflicted to his head and hands. Finally the facehugger was slowly crawling away, dragging its injured tail behind it and leaving a trail of corrosive burns to the deck plating as it went. As soon as she saw this Baker raised her pulse rifle and fired. The rounds struck the facehugger centrally and its body burst open as they detonated internally. The exploding pulse rifle rounds boiled off much of the acid blood inside the facehugger but enough remained to be sprayed around the facehugger's body and burn numerous tiny holes in the floor and wall.

"Are you seeing this captain?" Baker asked.

With the feeds from the marines' cameras no longer being monitored from the *Neille*, Williams had used the *Sulaco's* own systems to allow him to observe them from the *Sulaco's* bridge instead.

"Yes, it's coming through now." Williams responded as he looked at the images of the latest two casualties to be inflicted on the marines, "Meet me at the central entrance to the hold. The *Sulaco's* bringing Maddie and Craig aboard in a lifeboat and I want us all to stick together until I can decide what we're going to do now."

"Understood captain. We're on our way." Baker said.

14.

Baker and Cooper arrived at the entrance to the *Sulaco's* hold first and were waiting when Williams and Lawrence arrived.

"Looks like the lifeboat's being brought aboard now." Baker said and she pointed to the display beside the door that indicated that the cargo hold on the other side of the door had been de-pressurised.

Williams knew that this meant that on the other side of the door the *Sulaco's* computer had opened the external cargo bay doors and was using the cargo handling robot arms to draw in the EEV from the *Neille*. This process took only a few a few minutes and then the external doors slid shut once more. The ship's computer then began pumping air back into the hold and as soon as the pressure was equalised with the corridor outside the display beside the door changed to indicate that access to the hold was no longer prohibited.

Slamming his hand down on the door control, Williams squeezed through the opening door as soon as the gap was wide enough to allow him through. Inside the cargo hold he saw the *Neille's* EEV sitting close to the massive external doors. Williams ran across the hold towards this and grabbed hold of the lever located beside the hatch labelled 'RESCUE'. He turned this through ninety degrees and then ducked out of the way as he pulled it towards him, triggering the explosive bolts that held the EEV's hatch in place. With the EEV now opened Williams rushed to the hatchway and was promptly knocked backwards as Maddie leapt out of it and wrapped her arms around him.

"I knew you'd save me." she said and then she kissed him.

"I take it you're okay then." Williams replied as he prised her away from him.

"I'm fine." she said and she looked across the hold to where Lawrence, Baker and Cooper were approaching and she frowned, "Is this all that's left of us?"

"I'm afraid so." Williams answered, "The alien ambushed Aston and Holmes after the collision with the *Neille*."

"Do you know what happened to the alien aboard the *Neille*?" Lawrence asked when he came to a halt in front of Maddie but she shook her head.

"I don't have a clue." she said, "I'm guessing that it attacked the bridge and killed both Taylor and Kraven. But what happened to it after that is anyone's guess. It could have been killed as well or it could still be loose over there."

"That complicates matters." Lawrence commented.

"For now we'll just focus on dealing with the creature aboard the *Sulaco*." Williams said, "I'm still favouring luring it into an ambush but given that we're down to just the four of us—"

"Five." Maddie pointed out, "I may not be much use in a firefight but I can still make myself useful."

"Sorry, five of us." Williams said.

"That's okay. I'll forgive you." Maddie said before leaning over to kiss him on the cheek and he frowned briefly.

"Another problem is that we lost all of our robot sentries with the *Neille*. The *Sulaco's* armoury has plenty of small arms and even a few smart guns but it looks like Bravo team took all of the robot sentries with them and they were never brought back again." he said.

"I don't suppose you got far enough through those reports to tell how the freighter crew that first encountered one of these things dealt with it did you?" Lawrence asked, looking at Maddie.

"Well all but one of them died." Maddie replied.

"We'll try and skip that shall we?" Williams commented.

"The alien aboard the *Nostromo* was ejected into space from their shuttle by the sole survivor. Then she vaporised it using the shuttle's engines." Maddie explained.

"So can we lure the one aboard the *Sulaco* into an air lock?" Cooper asked, "Then we just open the outer by remote."

"The problem is doing it without trapping one of us in there with it." Lawrence said.

"Running in a space suit isn't exactly easy either." Baker added.

"Okay we'll go with a variation on the original plan." Williams said, "We'll lure the alien out of the ventilation system and ambush it. But rather than try to lead it to somewhere where we don't think its acid blood will cause any harm we'll hit it as soon as it appears. The *Sulaco's* armoury still has a couple of M-seventy-eights in it."

"We're going to shoot plasma guns at it?" Maddie exclaimed.

"Captain are you serious?" Lawrence asked, "Those things are designed to punch holes in tanks. Firing one aboard the *Sulaco* will—"

"Yes I know. The blast will take out whatever happens to be behind the alien as well. But the places we'll be

trying to draw it to don't contain anything that will compromise the spaceworthiness of the *Sulaco* and the plasma ought to vaporise the alien's acid blood along with its body."

"What about Craig?" Lawrence said, peering inside the EEV at the hypersleep chamber that was still plugged into it.

"I wouldn't recommend waking him up." Maddie replied, "Repeated freezing and thawing isn't going to do him any good and he's far from being fit for duty. In fact he may never recover enough to be able to serve again but his chances are going to be a lot better if we can leave him in hypersleep until we get back to earth."

"What will the alien do if it finds him like this though?" Baker asked.

"That probably depends on whether it can sense him alive inside the pod." Maddie said, "The alien didn't kill me when it had the chance, probably because I was no threat it could tell I wasn't made of meat. To the alien Craig is likely to be just another food source so it may attack if it's hungry."

"We'll fetch a cart." Williams said, "We'll move Craig to the *Sulaco's* infirmary and then seal it shut. I mean totally. We'll weld the vents closed and do the same to the door. Even if the rest of us are killed he'll be beyond reach."

"So why not do that for the rest of us as well?" Cooper suggested, "Seal of the hypersleep compartment and go into hypersleep. Set a course back to earth now and leave the thing to die of old age from the time distortion?"

"We don't actually know how long one of these creatures can live." Maddie pointed out, "It may be able to put itself into a form of natural hibernation that will allow it to survive the voyage. Just heading back to earth with it still loose on the ship was Niro's plan. It could be waiting for us when we wake up."

"So we warn *Gateway* that it's aboard." Cooper said, "They can send a team aboard to deal with it before waking us up."

"They won't." Williams said, "Someone back on earth is willing to go to extreme lengths to acquire a specimen of this creature. More than fifty years ago someone ordered a freighter to divert to an uncharted world to try and get hold of one. Then someone used Bravo Team to try and get one. If we tell anyone that there's one aboard this ship they'll come aboard alright, but it won't be to kill it. They'll want to take it alive and I'm not so sure that we'd be woken up to tell anyone about it afterwards."

"The Corps takes care of its own." Baker said.

"The Marine Corps sent Niro." Lawrence pointed out.

"Plus they sent the *Sulaco* out with Bravo Team aboard in the first place." Williams added, "Someone high up has been bought off." Lawrence smiled at this point, remembering hearing the same warning from Sergeant Major Castle, "No matter what we can't take this creature back with us. That includes the eggs as well. Any we don't destroy as part of the plan get torched once we're done. We'll take them back some bodies to study, but that's it."

Moving Craig to the *Sulaco's* infirmary and securing it was a time consuming procedure given Williams' decision that the surviving marines would now remain together for safety in numbers. First his hypersleep chamber had to be switched over to its internal power supply before it could be safely disconnected from the *Neille's* EEV and loaded onto a cart to be moved to the infirmary. Once there it had to be connected to the *Sulaco's* power grid and monitoring systems to make sure that Craig remained in stasis and his condition did not deteriorate. At the same time as Maddie was making sure that the connections were being made properly portable welders were used to fix sheets of metal over each of the infirmary's vents. This was a nerve racking procedure for Baker and Cooper who were all too aware that if the alien was inside the vent and close to them it would probably be able to strike and retreat before anyone could react. However, if the alien was close by it chose not to attack and when the vents were sealed the infirmary became one of the most secure places aboard the *Sulaco*.

"Okay that's it for Craig." Williams said as they stood outside the infirmary and watched Baker weld the door closed, ensuring that the alien would not simply be able to pull the door open as the younger specimen aboard the *Neille* had demonstrated the ability to do with the EEVs, "He's as safe as we can make him. Now let's get to the armoury. We've got an alien to hunt."

Though it was regarded as being man portable, the M78 phased plasma infantry gun, or PIG as it was affectionately known by some marines, weighed just over fifteen kilograms. The weapon came in two parts, the primary part was the plasma gun itself, a one hundred and forty centimetre tube with built in hybrid optical sight and range finder that held the cadmium telluride pellets that would be vaporised to create the plasma itself and the battery pack that was carried slung over the operator's shoulder. The weight of the weapon made it an unpopular choice for many marines who preferred the lighter if less effective and much slower firing M5 rocket propelled grenades over the M78. Thanks to this excessive weight the marines took just one of the weapons from the *Sulaco's* armoury and as the strongest among them Maddie was given the task of carrying it to the vent access where Williams intended for them to carry out their first attempt to lure the alien from the vent in order to kill it.

Preparing the eggs to be used as bait was delicate work. The marines needed to remove them from the

containers without prompting either of them to open and this required some basic engineering to be carried out by Maddie, the android being chosen in the hope that she would be less vulnerable to the facehuggers if anything went wrong with this stage of the plan.

Using a simple electrical cutter Maddie cut around the containers near to their bases, separating them into two pieces while still leaving the eggs completely covered. The upper sections of these then had rope tied to the carrying handles that though deformed from their exposure to the fire in the *Sulaco's* hypersleep compartment remained intact. This rope led back down the corridor to where Williams and Lawrence were positioned just beyond the location of an open doorway in the corridor, ready to drop the door shut in an instant if the alien charged them. Meanwhile Baker and Cooper were positioned beyond a different doorway where the other marines were not in their line of sight or, more importantly, their line of fire. Even if the plasma gun was aimed correctly, the sheer power of the weapon was expected to be enough to vaporize the alien and the energy blast was likely to carry on going. This meant that if the other marines were located on the far side of the alien then they would be in as much danger from the weapon as it would. The selected firing position meant that the blast would instead strike the access to the ventilation system, most likely doing considerable damage to the structure surrounding it but nothing that would put the *Sulaco* or its crew at risk. After leaning his pulse rifle against a wall out of the way Cooper knelt down in the corridor and lifted the heavy plasma weapon onto his shoulder, checking that the power pack now slung over his shoulder was connected properly before looking down the sight at the containers standing just outside the ventilation access hatch. While Cooper was readying himself to use the plasma weapon Baker stood by the controls to the door, watching the screen of a motion tracker carefully.

"Okay I'm set sarge." Cooper said, looking up at Baker and nodding.

"Captain, we're ready to go here." Baker signalled.

Williams looked around him when he heard this. While he stood by the door controls with his pulse rifle Lawrence was ready to use a flame unit to set light to the eggs while Maddie waited holding onto the rope attached to the containers.

"Same here." he responding, "Stand by, proceeding with plan. Keep an eye on your motion tracker and alert me the moment you spot anything."

"Copy that captain." Baker commented.

Williams then looked at Maddie and nodded to her.

"Do it." he told her and she gave a sudden hard tug on both the lengths of rope she held. The force of this was enough to pull both of the upper sections of the containers away and in the process the two eggs toppled over onto the floor, leaving them fully exposed to the marines. There was no time to find out whether or not being disturbed in this fashion would cause the eggs to open though as without needing to be told Lawrence made use of the flame unit he held.

It took just one quick blast of flame to smother both eggs in burning fuel and as quickly as he could Lawrence shut the weapon down and switched to his pulse rifle. As the eggs continued to burn their contents heated up rapidly and one after another in quick succession they suddenly burst open. Fortunately the facehuggers that they contained were not able to become active before they too were consumed by the flames. The fire suppression system in this section of the *Sulaco* had been deactivated for the purpose of this operation and so even as the smoke and flames reached up as far as the sensor on the ceiling above there was no reaction from the ship's automated damage control systems.

"It's working." Maddie said, smiling.

"Have you got the alien on your tracker?" Lawrence asked, glancing at the motion tracker Maddie had picked up after letting go of the lengths of rope.

"No. Look at the smoke." Maddie answered, pointing down the corridor towards the burning eggs.

"It's being drawn into the vents." Williams added, "Let's just hope that thing does have a sense of smell."

The alien knew that there was still prey aboard the ship and was cautiously trying to locate it. But all of a sudden it caught the scent of something familiar in the air and it came to a halt inside the vent, hissing as it sampled the air. The scent was that of the pheromones contained within eggs but there was something else mixed in with it, smoke. Somewhere not too far away there were eggs burning. The alien let out another, angrier hiss as it turned around on the spot and moving as fast as it could it hurried to see if it could save any of the eggs that were so obviously threatened.

Both Maddie and Baker watched the displays of their motion trackers continuously as the marines waited for the alien to take the bait and appear from the ventilation system. For what seemed like an age the readouts of both trackers remained blank. But then a single pulse appeared on Baker's tracker.

"Incoming!" she hissed, "Range fifty metres."

"I've got it too." Maddie added as the signal came within range of her motion tracker as well, "It's closing fast."

"Inside the vent?" Williams asked, ready to order his marines to reposition if it appeared that the alien had

outflanked them. But Maddie nodded.

"Looks that way." she said.

"Forty metres." Baker added, "Thirty five."

"Cooper, charge the PIG." Lawrence said and still aiming the heavy weapon towards the vent access hatch Cooper armed the plasma gun.

This action was marked by a high pitched whining sound as the battery charged up the rapid discharge capacitors that would be used to provide the sudden pulse of power to create the plasma that the weapon used to punch holes through even the toughest of targets. Even when the weapon's charging cycle was complete and the indicator informed Cooper that it was ready to fire the sound persisted as the weapon made sure that the capacitor remained fully charged.

Drawing closer to the source of the scent trail that the alien had been following, the vent began to fill with smoke as well. This did not concern the alien at all since it had no need to worry about breathing in the particles but the smoke would mask some of the other scents in the air of the vent. Assuming that it was close to its destination the alien slowed down, crawling along the vent as it now followed the smoke towards its source. Even through the smoke it became apparent that there was a significant opening up ahead as light penetrated into the otherwise darkened vent. But there was something else that attracted the alien's attention now as well and it came to a halt as it focused on this.

The sound was a soft but steady whining that was obviously coming from the same direction as the scent of the burning eggs. Though it had no real knowledge of technology the alien had listened to the many sounds associated with the *Sulaco's* normal operation since bursting out of its incubator's chest and this was not a sound it had heard before.

"Uh-oh." Maddie said and both Williams and Lawrence looked at her.

"What?" Lawrence asked. But before Maddie could answer him Baker radioed them.

"Captain I've lost it." she said.

"Maddie?" Williams commented and Maddie nodded.

"Same here." she told him, "It was at fifteen metres and moving slowly towards the hatch when all of a sudden it vanished.

"Vanished? How?" Lawrence said. Then Maddie held the motion tracker towards him.

"Motion tracker." she said, "As in tracks motion. It's obviously stopped."

"Yes, but why?" Lawrence said, "If it was taking the bait then why stop? If it's decided not to take the bait after all then why not retreat?"

"It knows something's wrong." Williams said, "It's a hunter and it knows when it's the one being hunted. I'll bet that right now it's trying to figure out what we're planning."

"Yeah? Well it may just have figured it out." Maddie said, looking back at the motion tracker, "It's on the move."

Around the corner Baker was also monitoring the alien's movement and calling out the distances to Cooper.

"Twenty metres. Eighteen. Fifteen, get ready that's just inside the vent." she said but then she frowned,

"Twelve metres. Ten."

"What the hell sarge?" Cooper said, "That's right in front of us."

"No, it's still above us inside the vent." Baker said and both she and Cooper looked upwards, "It didn't come down. Eight metres. Five."

All of a sudden there was a loud 'clump' from the ceiling as the alien struck the inside of the vent and the sound echoed downwards.

"Gotcha you son of a bitch." Cooper hissed and he pointed the plasma weapon upwards towards the source of the sound and fired.

The discharge of the plasma gun was marked by a brilliant flash of light as well as a wave of heat that spread down the corridor and around the corner as the bright white beam of superheated matter blasted its way through the ceiling and the vent above it, creating a hole almost a metre across and causing large lumps of molten metal to drop to the floor beneath the hole. Baker then looked at her motion tracker and saw that there were no active traces.

"Baker what's going on?" Williams demanded from around the corner, unable to see from his position and unable to come to investigate because of the fire burning at the junction between them.

"The alien was in the vent right above our heads sir." Baker responded, "Cooper used his to shoot right through the ceiling at it."

"Did he get it?" William asked.

"Err, I'm not sure sir." Baker answered, edging closer to the hole Cooper had blasted in the ceiling and peering up into the darkness of the vent, pointing her pulse rifle upwards as well just in case the alien was preparing to leap down at her, "I'm not registering any movement but-"

All of a sudden the alien's tail shot out of the hole in the ceiling and wrapped itself around Baker's neck

before she could react. Lifting her up off the floor, the alien swung the female marine from side to side and there was a sickening 'crunch' as the bones in her neck broke and moments later her head was torn completely free of her body. Both the severed head and the headless torso flew in opposite directions as the alien started to climb down from the vent, pausing right as it was in the hole in the ceiling and hissing at Cooper.

"Sarge!" he yelled as he looked at the remains of Baker and then looked up at the alien in the vent.

Though the plasma gun he still had perched on his shoulder had recharged by this point and was ready to fire again Cooper knew that in the time it would take him to aim the weapon the alien would be able to jump down from the vent, placing it too close for him to be able to engage it safely. Retrieving his pulse rifle from where it was leant up against the wall or drawing his pistol would also take too long and so Cooper did the only thing he could think of to do.

He ran.

Tossing the heavy plasma weapon and its battery aside he ran retreated down the corridor as rapidly as he could while behind him the alien descended from the hole in the ceiling at an almost leisurely pace. But the moment that it dropped to the floor it let out a loud hiss and set off after the fleeing marine.

"Baker, Cooper what's happening?" Williams signalled.

"It got the sarge. It just tore her freaking head off!" Cooper exclaimed, "It's after me."

Williams turned to Lawrence and Maddie.

"We need to find a way around." he said, "Maddie get to the bridge. I need updates on where Cooper is."

Maddie nodded and ran off before Williams and Lawrence set off to try and get around the flames to meet up with Cooper.

Meanwhile Cooper himself was continuing to flee from the alien and he knew that the creature was gaining ground on him. Passing through an open doorway he came to a halt by the wall and slammed his hand down on the control panel mounted there. Turning around he saw the door drop shut just as the hissing alien was about to leap through the doorway after him and there was a loud 'thump' as it was unable to slow itself to a stop in time to avoid running right into the door.

"Ha!" Cooper exclaimed as he heard the sound of the alien pounding on the other side of the closed door, "Didn't think of that did you?" then he paused to catch his breath before grabbing his radio microphone between his thumb and forefinger, "Captain this is Cooper. I've got the alien stuck on the other side of the door, it can't get to me now."

"Well done private. Where are you?" Williams asked.

"Just to the stern of the crew quarters at frame nine. I managed to drop door D-seven right in that thing's face." Cooper answered smiling when all of a sudden the sound of pounding on the other side of the door stopped. Then moments later there was the sound of tearing metal followed by a crash as something landed on the floor beyond the door as the alien, realising that it could not penetrate the door tore a vent cover out of its mounting and tossed it aside before leaping back up into the air vents. Cooper then looked up as he heard the sound of the alien moving through the vent to get around the door, "Or maybe it's found a way around." he commented before once again breaking into a run.

The alien continued to follow Cooper from within the *Sulaco's* vents and the marine could hear the sound of it coming after him as it moved without any thought to remaining hidden. Reaching the crew quarters themselves Cooper considered using one of the cabins as a hiding place, locking himself in. But he knew that every cabin had a vent of its own and if the alien discovered which one he was hiding in then he would be trapped inside with it so he carried on running, heading towards the recreational area of the ship where there was a large chamber used for playing various sports to break up the monotony of long space flights.

Bursting into the bridge Maddie rushed straight to the console where the feeds from Lawrence and Cooper's helmet cameras as well as the camera mounted on Williams' headset were still being displayed. From here she could see where each of the three marines was aboard the *Sulaco*.

"Captain, Cooper is heading for the sports' court." she told Williams, "Turn left-"

"Yes thank you Maddie, I do know my way around a Conestoga-class ship." Williams interrupted just as the feed from his camera indicated that he and Lawrence were making the turn Maddie had been in the middle of advising them to take.

As Cooper entered the *Sulaco's* sports' court he considered his situation, looking around the room and taking note of all of the access points to the ship's ventilation system. During his prior time aboard Conestoga-class vessels this was not something that he had ever considered but now it could be a matter of life or death to him and when he saw just how many potential points of entry to the room there were he began to think that he may have made a mistake in coming here.

All of a sudden there was a 'crash!' as the alien forced one of the vent covers from the wall and it fell to the floor. Instinctively Cooper turned towards the source of the sound and drew his pistol. The alien looked directly towards him as it jumped down from the vent before it hissed at him.

“Screw you!” Cooper shouted as he brought up his pistol in a double handed grip and at the same moment that the alien broke into a run he opened fire. Pulling the trigger as rapidly as he could Cooper fired bullet after bullet into the alien but it was not even slowed by the impact of the projectiles and in return it let out a loud screech as it charged right into him.

The force of the impact sent Cooper flying backwards and as he landed his helmet came off and rolled away, coming to a halt with its camera pointed away from both him and the alien. He was still able to retain his grip on his pistol though and though dazed he raised it and fired again until the slide locked back as the last bullet left the barrel. Cooper ejected the spent magazine and was in the process of reaching for another from his webbing when the alien pounced, lunging towards him with its arms outstretched.

Watching helplessly from the *Sulaco's* bridge, Maddie could not see what was happening in the sports' court. Instead she just heard the sound of Cooper firing the last of the bullets in his pistol before the alien's screech was followed rapidly by a man's brief scream.

15.

Williams and Lawrence charged into the sports' court together with their pulse rifles held at the ready in their shoulders. Each of them checked a different direction as they moved deeper into the room but they saw now signs of either Cooper or the alien. Instead all that they found was the broken vent cover, Cooper's helmet and still empty pistol as well as numerous spent bullet casings scattered across the floor.

"We're too late." Lawrence said, "It's gone."

"Then we should get out of here as well." Williams replied.

"Where to?"

"The bridge. Maddie's already there and we need to stick together."

"Are you okay?" Maddie asked as soon as Williams stepped through the hole in the bridge door.

"We're both fine thanks." Lawrence replied.

"I was going to ask you next." Maddie said defensively. Then she looked at Williams again, "What did you find?" she asked him.

"No blood and no body." he told her, "Cooper and the alien were both just gone."

"That might be because Cooper isn't dead." Maddie said and both of the marines stared at her.

"What? Why didn't you tell us before?" Williams said.

"Because I wasn't sure at first but look at this." Maddie said and she walked over to the console where the feeds from the marines were being shown. There were only three active displays now, one each from Williams, Lawrence and Cooper. Cooper's camera feed still showed nothing but an upside view of the sports' court while those of the two marines on the bridge now showed a bizarre view of the monitors themselves, stretching back infinitely as the images themselves were picked up by their cameras. But along with each of these camera feeds was the output of the marines' bio status monitors. As was to be expected the graphs for Williams and Lawrence showed both men to be in good health while Cooper's vital statistics were all reading flat.

"I don't see it." Lawrence said.

"Just wait, you will." Maddie responded and then she pointed to a tiny spike that suddenly appeared, "There, did you see that?" she asked.

"How can it be that low?" Williams said as he leant closer to the display.

"My guess is that without the electronics in his helmet to boost the signal his monitor can't reach us properly. What we're seeing there is a random reflection. I've seen about half a dozen pulses on different tracks for him. Wherever he is, Cooper's still alive."

"The nest that Thomas and Farrow found." Williams said, "The alien took Chin there to cocoon him. It must be doing the same to Cooper right now."

"Chin had one of those things inside him." Lawrence pointed out.

"The eggs." Williams said, "We need to make sure that the ones left aboard are all accounted for and destroyed. Then we'll head down to the nest to rescue Cooper and deal with the alien once and for all."

Checking the vent access points where the four remaining alien eggs had been placed revealed that all of them were still in place and each was dealt with using a short blast of liquid fire from a flame unit while they were still inside their sealed containers. However, despite the risk posed by the alien's acid blood Williams and Lawrence retained their pulse rifles as they entered the *Sulaco's* ventilation system as close as possible to the ship's infra-red masking tower and started to descend it. The only other option would have been to take flame units into the vents with them and although these would undoubtedly be effective against the alien they could not be used if Cooper was too close to it. Therefore, the two marines decided that the risks involved in arming themselves with pulse rifles instead were worth taking. Maddie remained on the bridge, monitoring the feeds from their cameras and from there she could remotely operate any hatch or doorway aboard the *Sulaco*, so if the worst came to the worst she could seal off a damaged section while still allowing the remaining marines to escape.

Lawrence also carried a motion tracker with him and the two marines paused at regular intervals as they descended to give him chance to check it for signs of movement. However, each time he did so the tracker returned no signals and the marines continued on their way down the tower.

"Okay it's right below us." Williams whispered when they were just a few metres above the resin coated alien nest, "Check the tracker again."

"Still clear." Lawrence replied, also keeping his voice low in the hope that they would be able to avoid alerting the alien to their presence.

Williams then produced a signal flare from his webbing and held it close to the wall beside him.

"Extinguish your lamp." he said as he turned off his own shoulder mounted light and Lawrence nodded as he copied Williams, plunging the pair into total darkness for a few moments before Williams struck the end of the flare against the wall and it burst into life, producing a small but brilliant flame. Then he threw the burning flare down the shaft below them into the nest, quickly taking hold of his pulse rifle again and aiming it down the shaft as well.

The marines waited to see if there would be any reaction from the alien to the flare dropping into its nest from above but there was no sound and Lawrence's motion tracker detected nothing. After a few seconds of just waiting Williams began to climb down towards the nest, steadying himself on the ladder with just one hand while he kept the pulse rifle in the other pointing downwards. The light from the flare became brighter as the marines descended until they emerged into the compartment that the alien had made the core of its nest where every surface was coated in the strange resin.

"What the hell?" Williams said as he stood on the floor and turned around, pointing his pulse rifle at the walls in front of him.

"What's wrong?" Lawrence asked from just above the nest.

"It's empty." Williams replied as Lawrence entered the nest as well.

Sure enough there were no signs of Cooper at all either in or out of a resin cocoon and the only things that were in the nest that Williams and Lawrence had not brought with them were fragments of the resin that had been broken away from Chin and left where they fell.

"We can't have outrun it." Lawrence said.

"No we can't. Even carrying Cooper it should have been able to get here well ahead of us." Williams agreed, "I don't think that it's coming back here any time soon. Perhaps when they broke Chin out Thomas and Farrow did something to disturb this place that the alien didn't like or maybe it just found somewhere better suited to it when we opened the doors. Either way I don't think it's coming back. We need to get out of here and come up with another plan."

Joining Maddie in the *Sulaco's* bridge Williams and Lawrence found the android sat at a console studying the design schematics of the ship.

"What are you doing?" Lawrence asked when he saw this.

"Trying to figure out where the alien will have taken Cooper." Maddie answered without looking away from the display.

"How are you searching?" Williams said as he went to stand beside her and she reached out to rest a hand on him.

"I'm looking for places where heat will build up. The IR masking tower is one of the warmer areas of the ship and since animals tend to nest in places they find comfortable I'm guessing that it likes it warm." Maddie explained.

"That's not really going to narrow things down much." Lawrence commented, "This ship is filled with equipment generating heat."

"Yes, but in order to make the ship harder to detect all that heat is channelled towards the masking tower to be dissipated covertly. That process involves creating paths of warmer air and it's my theory that the alien will find somewhere along one of these paths that catches heat as it passes through to set up a new nest."

"And if you do manage to find the nest, then what?" Lawrence said, "Do we have a better plan than just walk in and hope it's at home?"

"My priority is to recover Cooper." Williams replied.

"Well we may be able to detect him remotely." Maddie said, "We're getting intermittent biometric readings so his locator may still be functional as well. It's just that without his radio to boost the signal we can't pick it up from here. But if we get within a few metres then we may have better luck."

"At which point we go in and get him regardless of whether the alien's there or not." Williams said, "If it's not then we stake out the nest and wait for it come back. Maddie, you'll come with us as well."

"I will?" Maddie said, surprised.

"Yes, with just the three of us left we need all the help we can get now. Gunnery Sergeant Lawrence and I will act as the assault team while you support us with a motion tracker as well as monitoring for Cooper's locator."

"All we need now is a target." Lawrence added and Maddie smiled.

"Which I think I've found." she said, "Take a look at this." and she zoomed in on the schematic to a section of the *Sulaco* that was right at the bottom of the ship, "This is where the waste heat from the sensors gets drawn towards the masking tower." she said, running her finger along the display.

"There are systems that give off a lot more heat than the sensors." Williams pointed out, "Life support for example."

"I know. But the life support systems are more spread out whereas the sensor antennas are concentrated right at the front of the ship. The heat from them all comes back along this one route." Maddie said, "It's drawn through the ventilation system and according to the monitoring system we're seeing a twelve percent

reduction in air flow down there.”

“Almost as if someone's plugged part of the vent with resin you mean?” Williams said, smiling at Maddie and she smiled back.

“I was thinking something.” she said.

“Maddie at times like this I could kiss you.” Williams replied.

“You do more than that if you want captain,” Maddie said, “and you should know you don't need to wait for a special occasion either.”

“He should know not to give you an opportunity like that.” Lawrence commented. Then he looked at Williams,

“Okay, so where do we start captain?”

“Seal the vent.” Williams said, “Close off every access point from the sensor assembly to the IR masking tower. We'll trap it inside and make our way along from the front of the ship here until we find the nest.”

“There is one thing captain.” Maddie said.

“What?” Williams responded.

“Well that vent is rather close to the ventral hull. If you or Sergeant Lawrence shoot the alien with your pulse rifles then there's a high chance that the acid in its blood will eat through the outer hull and decompress the entire vent.”

“That doesn't sound good.” Lawrence said.

“The acid will have to burn through several layers of material before it can dissolve the hull itself and cause a loss of pressure so that ought to give us enough chance to get clear.” Williams said, “But we'll take an incinerator unit along with us as well, just in case we get a clean shot at the thing with it.”

16.

The trio gathered around a hatch in the floor of one of the *Sulaco's* lower levels, located not far from the cluster of sensor antennas at the very front of the ship. Williams and Lawrence trained their pulse rifles on the hatch as Maddie used a compact hand held computer to release the hatch, both marines ready just in case the alien was waiting for them right beneath it as it slid open. In addition to his pulse rifle Lawrence also had a flame unit slung on his back to call upon should the opportunity to use it arise. However, no armoured alien warrior came leaping out of the vent when the hatch was opened and the two marines waited while Maddie swapped the computer for the motion tracker she had slung over her shoulder. Taped to this was a second tracking device, this one a small cylinder that would fit in the palm of a hand and had a simple numerical display. This would tell the user the distance to a specific signal and in this case it had been tuned to detect the signal from the locator worn by Cooper providing that Maddie could get within about twenty metres of it.

"Anything?" Williams asked and even though he was not looking at her Maddie instinctively shook her head. "Nothing moving and no locator." she said.

"I'll go first." Lawrence said, activating the lamp fitted to his armour and then he carefully climbed down into the vent. Once inside he looked along the vent but there were no indications of either the alien or Cooper being anywhere close by. The beam from his lamp showed the vent to be in what he would call perfect condition. There were no signs of damage from acid dripping on it should the alien have bled inside it and none of the surfaces had been covered in the strange grey resin that the alien secreted somehow. Maddie's statements about the vent being used to transfer heat to the *Sulaco's* infra red masking tower were clearly correct and Lawrence could feel the heat all around him, especially prominent given the lack of any air flow to provide a breeze now that the vent was completely sealed.

"It's clear." he called out, moving away from the hatch to allow the others to follow him into the vent.

Williams was next down, followed by Maddie.

"Wait a moment." she said as soon as she landed and she checked the motion tracker and locator receiver again, just in case being in the vent gave either a better reception. But once again there was nothing registering on either device, "Okay, let's go." she added.

Lawrence then began to make his way along the vent. The confined space made it impossible for him to stand up and he moved slowly, always keeping his rifle pointing straight ahead. None of the three spoke as they moved, not wanting to risk missing even the slightest sign that the alien was close by because they were distracted by conversation. However, that situation ended when the locator receiver suddenly let out a soft 'bleep' and the trio came to a halt.

"Maddie?" Williams whispered, looking over his shoulder at her.

"Twenty metres." she answered just as quietly. Then she checked the motion tracker again but the display of that device remained blank, "No movement still."

"Keep going." Williams said to Lawrence. Then he glanced back at Maddie again and added, "Let us know when we reach ten metres. We'll stop and scan again there."

The marines continued forward with Maddie watching the range reading on the locator tracker counting down. Despite the light from their lamps being obvious indicators of their presence, there remained no sign of the alien moving to attack and the vent remained clear of obstructions.

"There, ten metres." Maddie said suddenly and the marines came to an abrupt halt while she checked the motion tracker again. But after a few seconds she just shook her head, "I've got nothing." she added.

"I might have something." Lawrence said softly and he moved to the side of the vent so that Williams and Maddie could see past him when he angled his shoulder mounted lamp so that the beam shone at a point of the wall further along the vent where the flat metal plating suddenly became coated in organic looking resin and Williams smiled.

"The nest, we've found it." he said, "Maddie, stay back here. Lawrence, let's go and end this."

Leaving Maddie behind the two marines advance into the nest. Behind them Maddie watched the motion tracker display carefully and all three of them expected the alien to leap out at any moment. There were monitoring stations intended to measure air flow and temperature as well as detect contaminants in the air at regular intervals along the length of the vent and at these points it opened out into a small chamber just about large enough to stand up in and it was in the next of these, just a few metres further forwards of where the marines had halted that the alien had constructed its new nest. Here the warm air passed by a column of electronic equipment that gave off yet more heat and the alien had coated the whole chamber in resin. The way the resin had been applied to the chamber, coating the sensors built into the central column that had obviously affected the air flow readings that in turn had led the marines here. But more importantly as they stepped into the chamber and were finally able stand up straight they saw Cooper pinned up against a far

wall, covered almost entirely in the alien's resin as well. The marine's head was slumped forwards and he was obviously not conscious. But Williams could not tell if he was badly hurt from where he stood.

"Maddie get up here!" Williams called out as he looked around for the alien itself. But when he found nothing he looked at Lawrence instead, "Cover the vent over there." he ordered, pointing towards where the vent narrowed again as it continued on its way towards the infra-red masking tower.

Nodding, Lawrence darted over to the narrowing in the vent and crouched down by it, pointing his pulse rifle down the vent just in case the alien decided to return to its nest.

"What's going on?" Maddie asked as she stepped into the nest as well and stood up.

"Help me get Cooper free. I need to know his condition." Williams told her and she hurried to his side. Before they made any attempt to free Cooper from his resin prison Maddie lifted Cooper's head and examined it closely.

"I don't think he's had one of those creatures on him captain." she said, "I don't see any of the marks on his neck or the sides of his neck that I'd expect if he had. But we need to get him to medical so I can check him out properly, any injury that knocks someone out is serious."

"Okay, let's get him down then." Williams said as he slung his pulse rifle over his shoulder before beginning to pull at the resin, breaking pieces of it away. Maddie did the same, only thanks to her superior strength she was able to rip much larger chunks of the strange material away from Cooper than Williams was. They freed Cooper's limbs first and then Maddie reached up to grab hold of the resin that covered one of his shoulders, serving to support his weight against the wall.

"Are you ready?" she asked, looking at Williams and the marine reached up to support Cooper before nodding.

"Go." he responded.

Pulling as hard as she could, Maddie tore the resin away from the wall and with it Cooper was freed, falling into Williams' arms.

"Lie him down." Maddie said, "I need to double check him."

They lay Cooper on the floor of the chamber and removed his armoured chest plate. Maddie crouched down beside him, tapping his ribs to see if there was any evidence of broken bones before she placed her head against his chest to not only listen to him breathing but also to see if her superior android hearing could detect any signs of anything else inside his body moving around. But the next sound heard in the nest did not come from inside Cooper's chest.

Before starting to assist Williams in freeing Cooper, Maddie had set her motion tracker down on the floor and no-one had paid it any attention until it produced a soft 'ping' as it detected movement from further along the vent.

"Maddie." Williams said just as she reached out to retrieve the device.

"Range forty metres." she said, "Single slow moving contact."

"I don't see anything." Lawrence said, bracing his pulse rifle against his shoulder and waiting for the alien to appear in the light of his shoulder lamp.

"It's stopped." Maddie said as the signal vanished.

"Maybe it's not in the vent. Maybe it's above us." Lawrence suggested.

"I don't think so." Maddie replied, "The reading was dead ahead of you and there's no corridor running along there."

Williams smiled.

"I've got an idea." he said and he looked at Maddie, "Maddie, if we followed this vent all the way to the end what would we come to?"

"It runs into a filtration unit that scrubs the air and dumps the heat into the masking tower." Maddie answered.

"So it's a dead end then?" Williams said.

"I suppose so. But there are hatches." Maddie replied.

"Which are sealed." Williams pointed out, "Now what if we unsealed the one at the end? The alien would have to come out through there."

"I thought we wanted it trapped in the vent." Lawrence said.

"When I thought it would be here in the nest I did. But now I'm thinking about driving it out where we can deal with it safely out in the open."

"We tried that with the eggs. It didn't work." Maddie pointed out.

"No, we tried luring it out. I'm talking about giving it no choice." Williams said, "We use the incinerator to drive it back along the vent to the hatch nearest the end. Then when it's nowhere else to run and has to leave the vent we hit it with a PIG."

"It could have been the PIG that gave away our ambush." Maddie said, "Those things do give off a distinct sound when they charge up."

"Then it stays in the vent and gets roasted by the incinerator. Either way it's dead." Williams said. Then he looked at Lawrence, "Give me the incinerator." and he pointed to the flamethrower on Lawrence's back.

"You're staying in the vent?" Lawrence asked, "It should be me."

"Yes it should." Maddie agreed and Lawrence frowned.

"Gunnery Sergeant Lawrence, what's your rating on an M-seventy-eight phased plasma infantry gun?" Williams asked.

"I've got an expert rating." Lawrence answered.

"Well I've only fired one twice and I missed both times when the heat bloom made me flinch." Williams said,

"So I'll take the incinerator and use it to drive the alien back down the vent towards you."

"Err, do I need to point out that firing a plasma gun this close to the hull could cause a breach?" Maddie said.

"Only if it's aimed at the hull." Williams said.

"Which in this case would mean me shooting at my feet." Lawrence added before he removed the flame unit from his back and handed it to Williams, "Okay, I'll go pick up the gun Cooper dropped and head for the hatch."

"What about me?" Maddie asked.

"Well first you and Lawrence need to get Cooper out of here." Williams replied, "Take him to medical and unseal the door. Then head to the bridge and open the hatch at the end of the vent as soon as Lawrence is in position. That's when I'll start down the vent."

Maddie frowned.

"This plan is stupid." she said, "You promised to have sex with me when this is over and now you're going to die first."

"Maddie, just go." Williams told her.

Williams waited alone by the narrowing in the vent while Lawrence and Maddie headed for where they would execute their own roles in his plan. The bright blue pilot light of his flame unit hissed softly in the otherwise silent alien nest and Williams considered the possibility that the alien would not wait for him to try driving it back towards Lawrence and his plasma gun, instead opting to charge directly at him and Williams suddenly realised that he did not know exactly how long it would take the flamethrower to incapacitate the alien.

"In position." Lawrence's voice said over the radio as he knelt down outside the vent and aimed his plasma weapon towards the hatch, activating the charging sequence right away.

"Okay I'm opening the hatch now." Maddie responded.

"Confirmed, hatch is open. Captain you're all clear to proceed."

Williams sighed before he replied.

"Entering the vent." he said before he started to crawl along the vent, his flame unit held pointing ahead of him.

After going just a few metres Williams paused and squeezed the trigger of the flame unit briefly, sending a short blast of flame down the vent. He made sure not to aim this directly at the walls of the vent to avoid the burning liquid sticking to it in large patches that would continue to burn. Instead most of the fuel was burnt up still in the air and Williams paused to see if there would be any reaction from the alien. When he neither heard nor saw anything though, he continued to crawl along the vent.

He repeated the process of crawling a short distance before unleashing a brief blast of flames that would quickly extinguish themselves before waiting to see if the alien would reveal itself as it retreated several times. But each blast of flame produced no noticeable results and Williams started to question the wisdom of his plan.

"You know it suddenly occurs to me that we're not entirely certain that this thing is afraid of fire at all." he transmitted.

"Everything's afraid of fire." Maddie replied, "Even me."

"I didn't think synthetics were programmed to feel fear." Lawrence commented as he waited outside the hatch.

"It's part of my self preservation programming." Maddie told him, "I'll avoid any action that could cause me damage unless specifically ordered otherwise."

"Well so far I've not seen a damned thing down here." Williams said and he glanced back down the vent towards the nest, "I must have come fifty metres."

"Captain that's right where I saw the trace on the motion tracker. Are you certain there aren't any signs of the alien?" Maddie replied.

"Yes I'm certain. I can't." Williams began before he stopped suddenly. Angling the beam of his shoulder lamp upwards Williams saw that the alien had been able to rip one of the metal panels that made up the ceiling of the vent out of place, giving it access to the *Sulaco's* internal superstructure and within this space that it had gained access to the alien had begun to construct a path to another section of the ship using its resin secretions.

"Captain are you there?" Lawrence asked after a few seconds pause.

"Yes, yes I'm here." Williams said, "I think there's a flaw in my plan. The alien's been busy."

Looking back and forth along the vent Williams guessed that he was not far from the magazine for the *Sulaco's* ventral rail gun turret. This suggested that the explosion had caused damage to the vent that had

enabled the alien to pry apart the ceiling here to construct an alternative way out.

"What's wrong?" Maddie said.

"The alien's torn a hole in the top of the vent." Williams told her, "I don't think its down here with me. I'm going to have to go after it."

"Captain no." Lawrence said, "Wait for me and I'll-"

"I'm heading up now." Williams said without bothering to wait for Lawrence to finish.

Before he climbed out of the vent he aimed his flame unit along it further and unleashed another blast of fire. But this time he held the trigger down longer and moved the weapon back and forth so that he blocked the entire vent with burning liquid, thus ensuring that if the alien was hiding somewhere further along it then the creature would be unable to follow him for some time while it waited for the flames to burn themselves out. Then Williams crawled directly under the hole in the vent and slung the flame unit over his shoulder before starting to climb.

Beyond the confines of the vent the alien had bent and twisted pipes and bundles of cables out of the way to create a narrow channel that Williams could just about crawl along.

"Captain I don't like the look of this." Maddie said from the bridge, monitoring the signal from his headset's camera, "That thing could be anywhere."

"That's why I need to find out where this leads to." Williams replied, continuing to crawl along the narrow crawlspace.

In the confines of the crawlspace Williams found that he could not keep his lamp pointing directly ahead of him without it getting in his way and so he found himself unable to make out details of what lay ahead of him. This almost proved disastrous when he placed his hand on a flat surface in front of him only to find that when he transferred his weight to it the surface gave way entirely, falling free and letting light from below to pour into the crawlspace. Looking down through the hole Williams saw that he was right above the *Sulaco's* main hangar with the one remaining drop ship right below him. The fact that the 'floor' beneath Williams had given way here indicated to him that what he had just put his hand on was an inspection hatch for the cabling that had been pushed out of the way by the alien.

Carefully Williams moved past the hole beneath him and continued along the crawlspace until he heard the sound of something moving ahead of him and he came to a halt. Then he heard a viscous sounding hiss and he reached onto his back for the flame unit. But even though he was able to release the sling holding on his back, when Williams tried to move the weapon in front of him it became stuck. Williams tugged at the flame unit, attempting to free it but he was unable to see exactly what it was that was wedging it in place and so it remained stuck fast.

Right then he heard another hiss ahead of him, this one louder than the first and he realised that the alien was now coming towards him and he swore.

"Maddie I'm going to get out of here." he said, "I'm heading for the hangar."

"Copy that captain. Do you want back up?"

"Yes, yes I do." Williams said.

"Gunnery Sergeant Lawrence, did you get that?" Maddie asked.

"I heard it." Lawrence replied as he put down the heavy plasma weapon and instead picked up his pulse rifle, "I'm on my way."

Flattening himself out against the bottom of the crawlspace Williams then backed up, sliding himself under the stuck flame unit. Once he was past the weapon he was able to see that both the muzzle and rear of the weapon had become tangled in wiring and although it was tempting to try and free it to use against the alien Williams decided to leave in place as a barrier while he made his escape.

There was no room to turn around in the crawlspace and so Williams was forced to continue backing up until he reached the open access panel to the hangar and began to lower himself down through it. At that moment he heard a banging sound from along the crawlspace, accompanied by a sudden screech and he realised that the alien had reached the flame unit and was attempting to clear the obstacle from its path. Holding onto the edge of the inspection hatch, Williams lowered himself as far as he could but this still left him dangling several metres above the drop ship.

"Here goes." he said to himself before he let go and allowed himself to fall the rest of the way. Landing badly on the upper hull of the drop ship, Williams rolled off onto the floor below and gasped as he landed heavily once more and he grabbed hold of his knee instinctively when he felt pain in it. Then he heard an ominous hiss from above him and he looked up to see the alien sticking its head through the access hatch in the ceiling, "On crap." he muttered as he got to his feet, wincing as he put weight on his injured knee.

The alien then jumped down from the access hatch and landed on top of the drop ship. Meanwhile Williams looked around for an escape route and he saw the flight of steps leading into the drop ship. He hobbled towards them as quickly as he could and just about made it inside the drop ship when the alien jumped down from on top of it and advanced towards the steps as well. Williams struck the control to retract the steps and seal the drop ship but before they could close fully he heard the sound of the alien leaping up onto them. Inside the drop ship Williams saw racks of weapons, both pulse rifles and flame units ready for the taking.

But he knew that none of them would be loaded and he doubted that he could ready any of them for use before the alien was able to reach him so instead he retreated further, backing into the cockpit and closing the door behind him.

"Lawrence where are you?" he signalled, standing right at the front of the cockpit beside the pilot's seat and looking at the door.

"Almost there captain. What's your situation?"

"I'm trapped in the drop ship with the alien at the cockpit door." Williams said as the alien began to pound at the other side of the door. Williams drew his pistol. Based on other people's experiences in fighting the alien he did not consider the weapon to give him a good chance of defending himself against it, but for now at least it was the only weapon he had and he pointed it towards the cockpit door.

Unexpectedly, the pounding stopped and Williams began to wonder whether the alien may have given up and gone away. But this thought was banished from his mind when all of a sudden the illuminated control beside the door changed colour and he realised that the alien had been able to figure out how to open the door just as it slid open.

Standing in the doorway the alien looked straight at Williams as he pointed his pistol at it. The alien hissed and started to advance and Williams was just about to fire his pistol when he saw that in its quest to get to him the alien had climbed up onto the co-pilot's seat at the rear of the cockpit and an idea occurred to him. Rather than open fire, Williams did the last thing that the alien expected of him and dived towards it. But his target was not the alien itself, instead it was the lever built into the floor in front of the co-pilot's seat and he reached out to grab hold of it before rolling aside and covering his face at the same time as he pulled the lever as hard as he could.

Instantly the cockpit was filled the sound of explosive bolts detonating that disorientated both Williams and the alien as the cockpit canopy was propelled upwards. Less than a second later this was followed by the co-pilot's seat itself, taking the alien that was still perched on top of it with it. Though the drop ship's ejection system was designed to be capable of being used while the drop ship was landed it had never been intended to be used while inside a hangar, whether on the ground or aboard a ship. The power of the explosive charges used to propel both the canopy and seat away from the drop ship was so great that in rapid succession both of them slammed into the ceiling above the drop ship and in the process the alien was caught between the seat and the ceiling. The force of the impact was not enough to kill the alien but it did emit a pained screeching as parts of its exoskeleton were split open before it fell back down to the floor, landing close beside the drop ship.

Despite his hope that the alien would have been killed by this, Williams could still hear it hissing in anger and he looked out of what remained of the cockpit to see it lying on the hangar floor beneath the ruined cockpit canopy as it struggled to pull itself out from under it. But the sounds being made by the alien were not all that Williams could hear. When the alien had been crushed against the ceiling by the ejector seat it had started to bleed and right now this blood was eating away at the floor of the hangar.

"Oh no." Williams said.

Williams then hurried out of the drop ship as quickly as his injured leg would allow him to move and as he hobbled across the hangar he activated his headset.

"Maddie be ready to lock down the hangar on my command." he transmitted, "The alien's bleeding all over the floor and it looks like it's going to eat right through the hull."

All of a sudden Williams heard a crashing sound and he looked around to see that the alien had been able to throw off the cockpit canopy and was getting to its feet. The alien then looked at Williams as he backed away and he raised his pistol and opened fire. Just as had happened so many times before, the bullets had no effect on the alien, bouncing off its armoured head and in response the alien screeched at Williams, opening its mouth wide and extending its secondary jaws towards him. The alien broke into a run that would have seen it reach Williams well before he could make it as far as the nearest exit from the hangar when all of a sudden the door opened anyway and Lawrence came charging in.

"Down!" he shouted and Williams dived for the deck as Lawrence took aim and opened fire. The short burst of fire struck the alien's hip, blasting a large chunk of flesh away at this point and the alien screamed as it fell to the floor with yet more blood now gushing from the wound. "Captain are you okay?" Lawrence then asked, rushing forwards to help Williams back to his feet.

"We need to get out of here." Williams replied, "Any minute now this whole place is going to get sucked out into space."

The pair then headed for the doorway by which Lawrence had entered the hangar, leaving the screaming alien thrashing about on the floor in agony while its blood continued to burn towards the *Sulaco's* outer hull. As soon as they had passed through the doorway Williams reached out for the control to close it and both he and Lawrence turned around as it slid shut behind them. The door itself had a small viewport set into it and the two marines peered through this.

In the hangar they saw the injured alien dragging itself back to its feet. Lawrence's pulse rifle burst had further injured the creature but it was not dead yet and it still seemed able to support itself upright as it

staggered towards the doorway, still dripping acid onto the deck. Behind it the larger pool of acid created when the alien had first come crashing to the deck and then been hit by the pulse rifle fire had already burned a significant hole that was getting deeper all the time.

All of a sudden the first drops of this acid reached the *Sulaco's* outer hull and ruptured it, producing a powerful rush of air as warning klaxons began to sound.

"Captain the hull's breeched!" Maddie exclaimed, "The hangar is going into lock down but we're losing pressure all over the ship because of that hole into the superstructure."

"No!" Williams snapped, "Maddie I want you to override the lock down. Seal every compartment on the ship and shutdown the air circulation to everywhere except the hangar. I want as much gas pumping into it as possible. I don't care where it comes from but as long as we still have air to breathe you mustn't let the flow to the hangar shut off."

"Captain are you-" Maddie began.

"Just do it." Williams interrupted.

"Yes captain. Sealing all vents and bulkheads." Maddie said and Williams and Lawrence heard the sound of doors closing.

"What are you planning?" Lawrence asked.

"Look at the alien." Williams told him, peering through the viewport into the hangar.

Inside the alien was struggling against the flow of air dragging it back towards the breach in the hull that was growing wider as the acid continued to eat through it. There was little in the way of solid debris to be blown out into space but the continued rush of air was proving to be sufficient to push the alien towards the hole. Williams doubted that the alien would have any comprehension of what was happening to it but he could see that it was trying to fight against the pull towards the hole, screeching as it did its best to dig its claws into the grill-like deck plates but the force of the rushing air simply ripped up the deck plate as well and both it and the alien were pushed back towards the hole.

Tumbling into the hole burned in the floor by its own blood the alien made another attempt to steady itself, grabbing hold of a section of pipe at the edge of the hole that came within reach as the alien fell and this arrested its fall while air continued to rush past it. But as the flailing creature attempted to climb back up into the hangar, the alien's own acidic blood was still attacking the sides of the hole where it came into contact and before the alien could gain a hold elsewhere the pipe abruptly broke and sent the creature tumbling into space.

Knowing the approximate location of the hull breach, Maddie had rushed to the nearest console that would allow her to access the *Sulaco's* sensors and she had realigned some of its optical sensors towards the ship's own hull as far as their mountings would allow. This allowed her to see the alien as it flew away from the ship, tumbling through space with its limbs and tail thrashing around. But she was not content to let that be the end of it and before it could get far enough to be lost to the *Sulaco's* optical sensors she brought one of the ship's free-electron beam laser turrets on line and targeted the alien.

"Captain the alien's away from the ship and I have a firing solution." she signalled.

"Do it." Williams replied and Maddie smiled as she fired the laser. Almost instantaneously she saw the alien glow brightly in the beam before it burst open and was vaporised.

"Target destroyed captain." she reported.

"Good. Now get the hangar sealed and let us out of here."

17.

Williams was alone on the bridge when Lawrence entered bringing with him a metal flask and three mugs. "The rest of them are all dead." Williams announced, "Bravo Team. They died on Archeron because some guy who worked for Weyland-Yutani wanted to get hold of some of those creatures for their Weapons Division."

"You managed to access the mission logs then?" Lawrence asked and Williams nodded.

"Ellen Ripley gave quite a detailed report of how a junior executive by the name of Carter J. Burke ordered the colonists on Archeron to investigate the crashed alien spaceship the crew of the *Nostramo* discovered more than half a century ago. He failed to warn them about the risks and it resulted in the deaths of all but one of the colonists, a Rebecca Jordan."

"The other name in the list of people in hypersleep." Lawrence commented.

"Exactly. Burke also attempted to have both Ripley and young Miss Jordan impregnated by the aliens before he was himself killed. Of the *Sulaco's* crew only Ripley, Hicks and Bishop made it back from the planet along with Rebecca. But they had a stowaway with them."

"The alien Maddie just vaporised?" Lawrence asked.

"No. Some sort of queen that lays the eggs they originate from. She ejected it into space as well."

"Seems to be a popular way of dealing with them. So what about the eggs on board when we got here? And if the company guy was called Burke then who was this Gibbs we found?"

"I'm not entirely sure. My guess is that the company hoped to be able to use the *Sulaco* to smuggle the eggs past ICC quarantine by buying off someone at *Gateway*."

"That would have to be a member of the Corps." Lawrence pointed out.

"Yes it would. It would appear that your old friend Sergeant Major Castle was right about this mission. It was doomed from the start. But I don't think it's over yet."

"It's not?" Lawrence responded.

"No. There's still the matter of what happened to the survivors of the mission to Archeron. We've found the *Sulaco* but that's only half the story. Plus we need to investigate the planet for ourselves. Weyland-Yutani must have obtained the eggs they brought aboard this ship from somewhere and my guess is that they've already been there. We need to make sure that they can't try this again. The consequences of a life form such as this getting loose on a heavily populated world don't bear thinking about." Williams said.

Just then Maddie entered the bridge.

"Craig and Cooper are both stable captain. They can remain in hypersleep until we reach earth. Added to that I've checked the damage the *Sulaco's* taken and confirmed that we'll be able to get home ourselves without needing to call for a tow." she said.

"Good. I've already laid in a course. We may as well get going." Williams said.

"Just one thing before we go back into hypersleep captain." Lawrence said and he produced three cigars from his pocket, "Now that Maddie's here as well we can do this. I found these among Apone's belongings and I figured he'd want us to smoke them in his memory." he said, handing one to each of Williams and Maddie while retaining the third for himself.

"I don't normally smoke these things you know." Williams pointed out as he took the cigar.

"Neither do I." Lawrence replied, pouring a drink for each of them as well.

Taking the mug Williams stood up and held it aloft.

"Apone. Ferro. Spunkmeyer. Hudson. Frost. Crowe. Wierzbowski. Dietrich. Vasquez. Drake and Gorman. Baker. Thomas. Farrow. Kenner. Aston. Moss. Holmes. Moore. Chin and Holden. Taylor. Kraven. Douglas and Michaels. Marines and Air Force together. Fallen comrades." he said, "And to Corporal Hicks, we will find out what happened to you. The Corps leaves no man behind."

"No man behind." Lawrence repeated before all three of them downed their drinks, "Now for the cigars."

Lawrence added before he lit each of the cigars in turn and both he and Williams took deep breaths, inhaling the fumes. Then all of a sudden both men began to cough.

"How did Apone smoke these things?" Williams said.

"Beats me." Lawrence replied and then both men looked at Maddie as she took another breath and then blew a ring of smoke into the air.

"What?" she asked, "These don't bother me. I don't have lungs."