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**MICHAEL JAN FRIEDMAN AND  
DIANE CAREY**

**TITAN BOOKS**

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For Ellen and Mike, who support me in my madness

## PROLOGUE

*Earth*, Ripley thought.

More specifically a long, golden strand of beach in New Zealand, the first flat, open piece of land she and her companions had spotted in their wary, wide-eyed descent. But they could hardly have chosen a more sun-dazzled, pristine place to set down.

Johner, surprised to find there was still a square meter of terra firma left undeveloped, had gone to do some exploring in a pine forest upland of the beach. That left Ripley, Call, and Vriess to secure the *Betty*, which hadn't taken very long.

Now, they sat—Ripley and Call cross-legged in the sand like children, Vriess ensconced in his motorized wheelchair—and watched Earth's setting star paint the seaward horizon a soft, spectacular vermillion.

"Unbelievable," said Call.

She had changed her jumpsuit to conceal the hole beneath her ribs through which her stringy guts were all too visible. *Somehow*, Ripley thought, *we'll have to get her fixed up*, though it might be hard to find someone willing to break laws to do the job.

Call didn't seem too worried about it at the moment. She was too busy soaking in the facts of where they were and how they had come

to be there.

Vriess was less comfortable about the situation, if the knot of flesh gathered above the bridge of his nose was any indication. Ripley could imagine what he was thinking easily enough.

*What the hell am I going to do here? How does someone like me fit in on Earth? And so on.*

Ripley was thinking the same things—and more. For instance, what would Earth's government do when it realized who and what she was? How would the military react, now that she had escaped their secret little science project?

Would it disavow all knowledge of the stupidity that doomed the *Auriga*? Or would it try to snuff Ripley out before she said too much about it?

Of course, she could try to elude the government *and* the military. There were ways to do that even on Earth, or so she had been told.

According to Call, there were enclaves on the home world that might be willing to take them in—people who had discarded their corporate existences in favor of a life in harmony with nature. It might be comforting to live among such people.

*And to forget about death for a while.*

Out of necessity, it had been Ripley's companion for years—hundreds of them, apparently. But it didn't need to be that way anymore. She had earned a respite by destroying the alien threat.

True, Ripley had believed it destroyed before, and it had still managed to reassert itself—first on Acheron, then on Fiorina 161, and finally in the military laboratories of the *Auriga*. But as far as she knew, the last drops of alien blood in known space were the ones flowing in her own veins.

And for lots of reasons, she wanted them to stay there.

As for the *Betty*, she had been useful to them, no question, but Ripley wouldn't care now if the ship were peddled for scrap. The *Betty's* owner, a razor-edged man named Elgyn, had been thoroughly gutted by an alien on the *Auriga*. They could leave his ship on the beach like a monstrous shell washed up by the tide, and no one in the galaxy would balk.

*Except Johner, maybe.* After all, he had a shopping channel habit to feed. If he let the *Betty* go for nothing, he would be passing up an opportunity to line his pockets.

"Hey!" Ripley heard someone call out.

Turning, she saw Johner descending a bluff, leaving long furrows in the rose-tinted sand. *Speak of the devil*, she thought, dredging up a phrase from her predecessor's life.

*Because I'm not really Ellen Ripley, am I? Not anymore than the beast they dug out of me was the embryonic queen I incinerated on the prison planet.*

"You're not gonna believe this!" Johner chuckled as he got closer. "There's nothing there—no towers, no roads, not even a frickin' trash can. Just trees all the way around!"

Johner was the one who had originally called Earth a shit hole. As it turned out, he had never even seen Earth firsthand. All he knew of her was what he had heard from other cargo haulers, and seen on a few old vids.

"Sonuvabitch!" said Vriess. "I was hoping to get drunk in one of them fancy revolving restaurants and throw my guts up!"

Then the two of them laughed in each other's faces.

"That's amazing," Call remarked. "Not so long ago, Johner was using Vriess for target practice, and Vriess was threatening to kill Johner in his sleep. Now look at them."

Ripley looked. "Maybe there's hope for the human species yet."

Call nodded hopefully. "And if there's a god, a little hope also for those who just look human." She closed her eyes and let herself fall back into the sand. "We're going to stay here, right?"

Ripley considered the question for a moment. She had arrived at the world that was home to Ellen Ripley. The aliens she had brought with her into this century were dead. Why not stay?

Forever, maybe.

# A L I E N S <sup>TM</sup>

**BOOK I**

**ORIGINAL SIN**

**MICHAEL JAN FRIEDMAN**

# 1

Johner had planted himself in Byzantium Station's dim, poorly ventilated, metal-drum excuse for a mess hall with the sole purpose of getting into a fight, so he didn't see any reason to waste time.

"Hey," he called out, his voice as loud and coarse and belligerent as he could make it, "you with the ponytail!"

The cry cast a hush over the room, drawing the eye of every hard-drinking, narrow-eyed cargo hauler in the place. With one exception, of course—that of the mean-looking specimen Johner was trying to piss off, who continued to hold court among his pals as if nothing had happened.

Johner cleared his throat. Then he ripped off a second remark, making sure he was two notches louder and more obnoxious this time—both qualities on which he prided himself. He had a third barb locked and loaded just in case, but it became unnecessary when his chosen victim angrily followed a companion's pointing finger and caught Johner in his sights.

Getting to his feet, the bastard glowered across the room at his unprovoked tormentor, his face the color of murder—and then some. *So far, so good*, thought Johner.

Being bigger and broader than most everyone he had ever met, he wasn't often the underdog in a fight. But the sonuvabitch giving him the evil eye was a good twenty centimeters taller than Johner and thirty kilos heavier, with a badly flattened nose, a mane of greasy, black hair gathered in a long, crooked braid, and a cascade of bulging muscles.

*It's okay, Johner thought. What's life without a challenge?*

"What'd you say?" Flatnose rasped, the muscles in his neck standing out like cords.

It wasn't that he hadn't caught Johner's remark perfectly the first time. It was more of a notice to all the thirty-or-so cargo haulers in the place that he was justified in the pain he was about to inflict.

Johner smiled around the wet, swampy stump of his cigar and kicked away the chair that had supported his feet. It skidded wildly across the floor and clattered into a wall.

"What I said," he replied slowly but unhesitatingly, "is if you're gonna spend the night giggling like a little girl, you oughtta do it somewhere people can't hear ya. It's just embarrassing."

The comment was greeted with bursts of laughter. But when Flatnose cast a glance around the room, it fell silent.

*Yup, Johner told himself, you made the right choice.*

"By the way," he added, plucking his cigar out of his mouth and flicking it end over end in Flatnose's direction, "I just love what you've done with your nose. Where can I get mine caved in that way?"

Right on schedule, the cigar hit Flatnose in the chest and plummeted to the floor. The bastard glared at Johner a moment longer, his nostrils flaring, his eyeballs wide and bloodshot. Then he started moving in the instigator's direction.



Johner held his hands up and rose from his chair, as if he wanted no part of the bigger man. “Crap,” he said, “don’t tell me I’ve gone and offended you. I got a real unfortunate habit of doing that.”

As he spoke, he watched Flatnose’s friends. Their hands were slipping toward their weapons—which were concealed, of course, since safety regulations prohibited weapons on the station. Not that haulers didn’t ignore safety laws on a fairly regular basis.

“I’m gonna *kill* you,” Flatnose snapped, tossing aside a chair standing between them.

“I guess I *have* offended you,” Johner concluded.

Before he knew it there was a fist in his face, snapping his head back and sending him sprawling over a table full of food. As the haulers seated around it scattered like cockroaches, Johner rolled and found his feet—just in time to absorb another bludgeoning, skull-rattling impact.

Coming up hard against a bulkhead, he tried to get his bearings. “Listen,” he said, “I shouldn’a made that remark, all right? No need to get your bloomers in a twist.”

Predictably, his choice of words made Flatnose even madder. He came after Johner with redoubled fury, his lips curled back from his teeth as if he were a wolf and Johner were his dinner.

But before he could connect again, Johner ducked— allowing Flatnose to crack his knuckles on the bulkhead instead. Pulling his fist back, the bigger man yowled with pain.

“That’s gotta hurt,” said Johner, moving at an angle away from the bulkhead so he had room to maneuver. “You want me to kiss the boo-boo?”

His eyes popping with fury, Flatnose heaved a table aside and moved on Johner again. But this time, he was a little more measured about it, a little more cautious.

“Come on,” said Johner, “don’t be shy.” He turned his cheek and pointed to it. “Go ahead, show me some love.”

The words were barely out of his mouth when Flatnose unleashed another attack. This time Johner deflected the blow with a flick of his forearm, stepped inside it, and drove home a point of his own.

It was as hard as Johner had ever hit anyone, and it sent blood flying from Flatnose’s mouth. But big as the bastard was, he didn’t go crashing to the floor.

He just stood there, a blank stare on his face, as if he were trying to remember who he was and why his face hurt so much. But Johner knew the guy wouldn’t keep blinking forever.

Before Flatnose could respond, Johner swung his foot into the bigger man’s crotch. With a squeal of pain, Flatnose doubled over. Then Johner stepped forward and launched an uppercut that flipped the bugger like an oversized flapjack.

Red stuff streaming from his mouth and nostrils, Flatnose hit the deck like a ton of ore. But Johner knew it wasn’t over—not as long as the sucker’s friends were around. When their boy was on top, they hadn’t lifted a finger to stop the fight. Now that he was stretched out on the deck, they would have business to take care of.

Right on cue, they pulled out their stun pistols and went for Johner. And though he had weapons of his own concealed beneath his jacket, it wasn’t going to save him from a three-against-one.

Not without some help.

“Come on,” he urged Flatnose’s friends, “blow me away—’cause if ya don’t, you might wind up like your sissy friend here!”

Suddenly two of the three went down face first, as if leveled from behind by an invisible hand. A moment later, Johner caught a glimpse of Vriess in his souped-up wheelchair, applying a palm-

shocker to each of the fallen haulers. The poor bastards didn't know what kind of muscle-twitching torture they were in for.

But Johner did. And though Vriess wouldn't get any particular pleasure from applying the palm-shocker, the unabashedly sadistic Johner would get enough for both of them.

Meanwhile, one of Flatnose's compadres was still standing. But the fall of his pals had distracted him—and before he could get *undistracted*, he was drop-kicked by a blond man half his girth.

*Krakke*, thought Johner. *Punctual as ever.*

As Flatnose's buddy fell, he wound up in the lap of an innocent bystander, who—less than pleased with the intrusion—grabbed him by his shirt and began pounding on him.

Which led to an altercation between two other haulers, neither of whom was associated with either Johner's faction or Flatnose's. Which inevitably resulted in a second skirmish, and a third.

Johner grinned. *The more we do this, the better we get.*

But then, haulers were always spoiling for a fight. It was simply a matter of lighting the fuse.

With both Flatnose and his buddies occupied, Johner could have just sat back and watched events unfold. But it was a party, and he wouldn't be happy until everyone was having a good time. With that in mind, he walked over to an unsuspecting, liquor-addled spectator and sucker-punched him across a table.

"Hey," a red-bearded hauler bellowed, "that's my buddy, you lowlife piece of crap!"

"Do something about it!" Johner bellowed back, and braced himself for the hauler's charge.

\* \* \*

Still crouching silently behind a bulkhead at the intersection of two corridors, Call consulted her inner chronometer. *By now*, she noted, *Johner should have brought things to a boil*. But she hadn't yet heard the crackle of the station's intercom.

Call turned to look back at her burner-toting companion, who seemed a bit more feral than usual—a trick of the shadows carving hollows beneath her eyes and cheekbones. But the real hollows weren't in the woman's face, were they? They were in her soul.

Call frowned at the pretentiousness of her observation. *Who am I to talk about souls?*

Just then, the intercom around the corner came alive: *"Security to the mess hall. On the double, assholes. We got ourselves a situation."*

Call craned her neck and peered past the edge of the bulkhead. She could see and hear the two security guards posted there exchanging predictably resentful remarks as they went pelting in the direction of the mess hall.

Finally, they turned into a perpendicular passage and vanished from sight. Then all Call could perceive of them were their retreating footfalls, which eventually faded to nothing.

Had she been working with someone else, she would have turned then and relayed the information. But in this case, it wasn't necessary. Her companion didn't need to see the guards to know they had left their post.

After all, her name was Ripley. She could do a lot of things other people couldn't.

Since Ripley was the one with the burner in her hands, she led the way into the passage. Her progress was graceful and economical, her stride the stride of a hunter.

Call tried to walk the same way, but she couldn't. She hadn't been built with stealth in mind.

Halfway to the next intersection, just past where the guards had been posted, Call and Ripley came to a circular seam in the deck. Had they not known to look for it, they would almost certainly have missed it.

But they *did* know. And, having seen its like on dozens of stations before this one, they knew what to do with it.

Placing her burner on the deck outside the seam, Ripley got down on her knees and pressed her palms against the circumscribed surface. Then, with a ripple of her jaw muscles, she twisted with both hands in a counterclockwise direction and—eliciting a brief, high-pitched shriek of metal against metal—began unscrewing what turned out to be a cover.

When Ripley had twisted it off completely, she set it to the side as if it were a dinner plate. It left her with an opening slightly greater in diameter than the width of her shoulders, and an unobstructed view of the well-lit passage below.

Retrieving her weapon, Ripley got to her feet. Then, without warning or hesitation, she took a step forward and plummeted through the opening. A moment later, her boots made a reassuringly solid *thunk* as she landed.

Giving Ripley a chance to get out of the way, Call hunkered down beside the hole, planted her hands on either side of it, and lowered herself though. Only after she was hanging full-length from the higher deck did she relinquish her grip, allowing herself to drop the last half-meter or so. As she came down beside Ripley, she looked around.

They were at the nexus of six corridors, each projecting from the next at an angle of sixty degrees. All six passages were lined with gaudy little red and green computer readouts, each one flashing data in accordance with a different function.

There didn't seem to be anyone around, but flesh and blood wasn't Call's expertise. She turned to her companion for her assessment.

Ripley's nostrils flared as she cast her senses out like a net, searching the vicinity for company. After a moment she nodded—apparently satisfied.

*We're clear,* Call thought.

She started down one of the corridors, seemingly at random. But without question, it was in that direction that she and her companion would find the unit they wanted— an older one kept strictly as backup in case one of the newer ones failed.

Call was certain because she had seen this layout many times before, stamped out as if with a cookie cutter. In the years when these stations were built, it was cheaper to manufacture them with only one set of specs in mind.

The strategy hadn't helped the company that manufactured them stay in business. Not that Call would be shedding a tear for it any time soon. She didn't have much use for corporations—or for that matter, the governments that sanctioned them.

As she moved down the corridor, she felt as if the computers on either side were calling out to her like prisoners in an old-fashioned cellblock, flashing pleas for help instead of codes.

*Stupid,* she thought, *ascribing emotions to data-crunchers. Next you'll be organizing a breakout.*

A moment later, Call found the particular little red readout she was looking for. Ripley, who had seen these places as often as Call had, flipped open a panel just below the readout and removed a tightly coiled cord with a long, slim needle at its terminus.

Call scowled at the sight of it. But Ripley, who had never had much patience with her companion's feelings in this regard, thrust

the needle at her nonetheless.

"Do it," she said.

"I'm doing it," Call assured her.

First she unfastened the button on her cuff and rolled her sleeve up past her elbow. Then she used her other hand to remove a mole from her forearm—or rather, what looked like a mole. In fact, it was a cap for the access port in her arm, anchored by the slim white string now dangling from it.

Call cursed under her breath as she accepted the needle from Ripley. "I hate this," she said.

Ripley nodded. "I know. You've only told me a hundred and fifty times."

Not so long ago, Call could have accessed the computer just by blinking. That was one of the abilities with which she and her fellow second-generation androids had been equipped. But after her model rebelled against its makers, Call and her comrades burned their modem drives so as not to be located through them.

Now she had to gain access to the computer manually. But that wasn't why she hated doing so. It was the way she felt when she interfaced with a machine—like her insides were turning to liquid. Like she wasn't real.

It was hard to explain to a human being. She knew because she had tried. Only another android might have understood her, and for all Call knew there *weren't* any other androids. Considering the fervor with which the authorities had hunted them down, she might well have been the last of them.

*There's a cheery thought.*

Gritting her teeth, Call slipped the needle through the hole in her artificial skin, inserted it snugly into her hidden port, and closed her

eyes. Instantly, the rush of incoming data swept her away, immersed her, *became* her.

It was brilliant, blinding, terrible, relentless. A ponderous, clashing interplay of forces unlike any she had known in the real world.

The android struggled to assert her identity, her separateness, while leaving herself open to everything around her. It wasn't easy. It made her sick to what would have been her stomach if she were half as human as she looked. Still, she endured the sensation and forced herself deeper into the data storm.

*Resistance.* Layer upon layer of it, insisting that she yield to the logic of her environment. It wanted her to be a logarithm, accommodating all its other logarithms in vicious, lockstep perfection.

*No,* Call thought. *I'm more than that, dammit.* But she didn't think it too hard because it would have slowed her progress.

Carefully she descended, negotiating a path around one data explosion after the other. Picking her way, first with the current and then against it, conserving herself, expending herself, until at last—in an incendiary burst of effort—she got to the place she was looking for.

And the information she sought. *Finally,* she thought, glad beyond words that an end was in sight.

But no sooner had the android reached her objective than she realized there was more—much more. *A whole abyss full,* she thought, marveling at its brilliance from the brink overlooking it. And it was exactly the kind of stuff they needed.

Unfortunately, Call would have to delve deeper to get it, and that made her already frizzing nerves frizz a little more. But she couldn't turn her back on a lode like this one. Not when it might give them the last precious piece of their puzzle.



*Hell, she asked herself with cynical abandon, what's the worst that can happen?*

Deciding it was a better idea not to think about it, she steeled herself and dove. And the deeper she went, the brighter and more insistent grew the data currents, picking at her like scavengers, trying to take bloody chunks out of her psyche.

But Call couldn't let herself worry about it. She had to concentrate on what she was doing.

When she reached the first node, she picked it clean. The same with the second and then the third. And she kept going, into places where the data was forgotten and even incomplete, though there was invariably enough remaining to serve her purpose.

Laboriously, painstakingly, Call gathered every tidbit in reach. And though the task seemed interminable, she eventually got it all.

But she paid a price, though. Her dedication forced her to drop her guard against the predations of the currents, and they left the edges of her consciousness in cold, wet tatters.

The question then was whether there was enough left of Call to fight her way back to the real world, where what she had gathered could be of use. She didn't know, but she was damned well going to find out.

Closing her eyes against the light, she climbed. And she kept at it, arms and legs pumping, regardless of what buffeted her in the course of her ascent.

Her burden was heavier and more unwieldy than she had imagined. It threatened to drag her back every time she made some progress, conspiring to keep her trapped in the deepest parts of the abyss. More than once, she thought about cutting some of it loose so she could bring back the rest.

But she hadn't made it that far by playing it safe. So she battled that much harder, pitting her strength against the fury of the storm. And an eternity later, cradling her last shreds of self-awareness, she found herself reaching for the blessed darkness ...

And with a final burst of determination, emerging into the real world again.

Slumping against the computer she had accessed, Call felt its hardness, its truth, its undeniable existence. *Damn*, she thought, gasping for identity, taking in long, ragged draughts of it. *That sucked*.

She never wanted to go that deep again. *Never*. But it had been worth it. If she was right about what she had collected, it would be the last time she had to go in at all.

Abruptly, Ripley's face loomed in front of her, her expression one of impatience. "Got it?" she asked.

"Yes," said Call. Out of pique, she decided not to say yet just how *much* she had gotten. "And I'm fine. Thanks for asking."

Giving into her revulsion, she plucked the needle out of her arm and thrust it back at Ripley. Then she recovered her "mole" and stuffed its string back under her flesh.

"All right," she said. "Let's go."

But Ripley was on the move already, heading back for the intersection of corridors with long, purposeful strides. Swearing softly, Call fell in behind her. It was a difficult thing to keep up with someone so manically single-minded.

The android was just glad Ripley was on *her* side. After all, she had briefly had a taste of the alternative.

It was years earlier, on the *Auriga*. Call had intended to kill Ripley because she believed Ripley had a monster inside her. As it turned out, the monster had already been ripped out.

But the monster's genes were still present in Ripley, slithering through her tissues, accelerating her metabolism. She was strong enough to put a knuckle-shaped dent in a bulkhead, durable enough to survive a bolt from a shock rifle at point-blank range. And her blood, given enough time, could eat its way through a meter-thick section of hull.

Yet the monster's influence was most evident in Ripley's mind. At her core she was a stone-cold predator, her every move designed to bring her closer to a quick and efficient kill. It was only by controlling her murderous instincts—no easy feat, at times—that she was able to exist among humans.

*Funny*, thought Call. Ripley's alien heritage couldn't be seen in her appearance. She looked as human as any other healthy, athletic woman who had spent some time in the gym.

*But then*, Call added inwardly, *so do I, and they put me together on a damned assembly line.*

## 2

*Nice*, thought Benedict, as he followed a narrow but well-worn path through the fragrant, flower-dappled jungle.

He watched a river of stars burn above him, fierce and insistent, easily visible through the unfiltered transparency of an overarching plastiglass dome. With a little effort he could imagine he was back on Earth, looking up at the midnight sky.

Even though it had been decades since he set foot on his home world. Even though he had forgotten which constellations were visible there, and at what times of year.

Of course, most of his colleagues hadn't seen the stars from Earth at all. They had been conceived and born light years distant from it, on one far-flung colony planet or another.

*Proserpina. Tsuronomai. Samhain. Brother-of-Darkness ...*

The names were romantic, even if the planets were just ore-laden balls of filth. But the colony in which Benedict labored had no exotic name because it wasn't *on* a ball of filth.

It was *close* to one, if one could call orbital altitude "close." However, it was tied to its host world only by a few fragile strands

of gravity, which allowed it to remain in a predictable place so supply vessels could find it without trouble.

More importantly, the colony's location in high orbit gave it unfiltered access to sunlight half the day, and freedom from the pests and airborne toxins plants hated. Which was why the Domes had been built in the first place.

Earth had gotten too crowded for growing things— especially those that could thrive only in rainforests or other rapidly dwindling environments. A sprawling, multi-domed botanical garden was an ingenious way to preserve and nurture endangered flora for a variety of useful purposes, most of them pharmaceutical, without incurring a lot of cost.

That was still the thinking as recently as thirty years ago. Since that time, Earth had become less and less concerned with preserving its endangered flora, developing a host of synthetic drugs that could do the same job as natural ones. The garden colonies—all six of them, spread out across regulated space—became afterthoughts.

Were it not for the considerable expense of dismantling and demolishing them, they probably would have been trashed. Fortunately, it was cheaper and easier to let them go on. So they remained in operation—as much a haven for people like Benedict, who didn't seem to fit anywhere else in the galaxy, as for the flora they strove to preserve.

*And now I don't fit in here either,* he thought.

Benedict had long ago grown tired of the other botanists with whom he shared the Domes—a bunch of pedantic asses with no idea how boring they were. He still huddled with Philip over a Chianti now and then, but even that was largely a matter of habit.

Had he known what it would be like to live in a Dome colony, to look across the same dinner table at the same bland faces for years

on end, he would have taken a different route in life. An Earthside job, a berth on a survey ship, anything but *this*.

When he was younger, he thought it would be romantic to work in a lonely, faraway place. It had taken him a while, but he had learned otherwise. And now it was too late to make a change. Benedict was too old, too trapped in his routine.

So he went through the motions, doing the work assigned to him but finding no inspiration in it. And with each passing year he surrendered a little more of him-self, ceding his hopes and dreams slowly but surely to the ether.

Even sex had lost its appeal to him. Given a choice between Hendrickson, Gogolac, and Angie, he had decided years earlier not to choose at all. Besides, Philip wouldn't have approved of his old school friend wallowing with his daughter.

*Not at all*, he added silently, with a smirk.

Of course, that didn't leave Benedict much to live for. Just an untrammelled view of the stars, which still managed to move him somehow, and the sort of comfort one could find in the leaves of the *sinjaba*.

Unlike most of the other specimens in the Domes, the *sinjaba* had been found on an alien world—one called Kali, after the mother goddess of Hindu mythology. But then, Kali was the most hospitable planet humans had found to date, the only extraterrestrial environment even remotely capable of supporting Terran life forms.

Otherwise, the *sinjaba* couldn't have been introduced to the Domes, which all maintained an oxygen-nitrogen atmosphere suitable for human consumption. Benedict was grateful for that compatibility.

*Most grateful.*

A moment later, Benedict saw what he had been looking for—a proud framework of white branches, not unlike the antlers of a fully grown deer, from which hung several lush cascades of pulpy, bubble-covered black leaves. Smiling to himself, he approached the lowest and most accessible branch.

Up close, the botanist was reminded that the sinjaba's leaves weren't really black—just such a dark green that they looked black from a distance. Taking the branch in one hand, he used the other to pluck from its foliage an especially promising-looking leaf, its flesh as thick and bubbly as any he had ever seen—a sure indication of its maturity.

*It's got to be mature*, he thought, grinning with almost childlike anticipation.

Then Benedict tucked the leaf into his mouth and began grinding its flesh between his molars. Each little bubble-pop released a concentrated burst of warm, bittersweet juice.

It wasn't the best taste in Creation, and it never had been. But then, it wasn't the taste that brought Benedict back to the sinjaba stand every chance he got. It was the fact that sinjaba leaves contained a rather ample supply of hallucinogens, and lovely hallucinogens at that.

The kind that made his bones melt. The kind that turned his face into a bright, blazing sun.

Everyone in the Domes thought Benedict was the mellowest person this side of regulated space. And truth be told, he had always had a good store of patience. But even he couldn't have tolerated the place for so long without help from his friends.

He ran his hand over another cascade of meaty, black leaves. "And you *are* my friends," he said out loud, his words garbled by the leaf already in his mouth. "My very *good* friends."

It was then that he began to feel the hallucinogen. It started out with a warm flush of languor in his belly, and slowly spread outward in the direction of his limbs. He congratulated himself on having made a very good choice of leaf.

*I'll have to remember this branch,* Benedict told himself. But even as he made the vow, he knew in his heart that he wouldn't keep it. Half the fun was in the hunt.



# 3

Normally, Bolero's choice of vista would have been limited to what she could see through her cockpit's heavily framed observation port—the clanking darkness of Byzantium's docking bay, relieved only by the ghostly, gray-green outlines of a neighboring vessel or the yellow glow of an occasional safety beacon.

Fortunately, she had another view to occupy her thoughts—the one on the small, rectangular vidscreen embedded in her patchwork pile of an instrument panel. It showed her the metallic, eight-sided corridor that ran through the station's main level, connecting mall traffic with the docking bays.

*Video courtesy of Vriess, she thought. As usual.*

The little guy may have lost the use of his legs, but he was one gifted sonuvabitch with his hands. *And who knows that better than I do?* she asked herself with a satisfied smile. It was nothing for Vriess to secret a remote vidcamera in a recessed bulkhead slot as he trundled past it in his motorized chair.

With a tapped command, Bolero got the monitor to show her yet another view—the one behind Vriess, because there was a camera

hidden in his chair as well. And from that perspective, she could tell Vriess was in the midst of a first-class brawl.

Which meant Johner and the others had already begun stirring the pot, and giving Call the distraction she needed. Bolero interlaced her slender, dark fingers, thrust them out with her palms outward, and gave her knuckles an audible crack.

Her mother had told her she would get big, ugly knuckles that way. She had also said that Bolero would never be happy roaming the space routes in a cargo hauler.

*Mom didn't know much, did she?*

Bolero had shipped out when she was eighteen, and had kicked around haulers ever since. But the day she hooked up with Ripley, she had stopped simply dragging cargo and embarked on something else.

*Something bigger, more important.* Something someone could hang a lifetime on and never regret.

Tapping a stud on her board, she opened a shipwide link. "Hey boys and girls," she said, "it's time to split this burg. Anything I should know about before I engage the engines?"

*"Honestly, Bolero,"* said a deep, cultured voice, *"you know I'm the only one aboard besides yourself. Yet you persist in addressing me as 'boys and girls.'"*

"I like saying it," she admitted. "The engines ... ?"

*"Eager for the harness,"* he assured her.

She nodded. "Thanks, Rama."

While Bolero still had the link open, she brought the ship's vintage Lockmart Specials online. They purred like a couple of big, contented kittens.

*"Working?"* asked Rama.

"Like right off the assembly line," she told him.

Then she cut the link and opened a new one on Byzantium. Her vid screen fritzed for a moment, then came together—showing her a middle-aged man with a florid complexion, a distinct second chin, and a steeply receding hairline.

His name was Corcoran. He was the chief traffic officer on Byzantium Station, a position of some importance to the cargo haulers obliged to deal with him.

Bolero had found excuses to speak to Corcoran on and off since the *Betty's* arrival the day before. It hadn't taken her long to make the traffic officer her bitch. But then, it was the rare male specimen who didn't fit that description eventually.

"You know," she said, "we've got to stop meeting like this."

Corcoran's cheeks turned redder than usual. *Painfully* red, like open wounds. *"Just what I was thinking."*

"Unfortunately," said Bolero, "we've got to shove off now. Just a short visit, you understand."

*"Sorry to hear that,"* said Corcoran.

Regulations being what they were, it wasn't supposed to be possible to leave a border station on short notice. But Bolero had known Corcoran wouldn't balk a lot.

*"Maybe next time you can stay a little longer,"* he said. *"Give us time to get to know each other."*

"That would be wonderful," she said.

Not that she had the least intention of returning to Byzantium. Once Ripley got what she wanted from the place, Bolero wouldn't give it a second thought.

Just as she had put behind her a dozen other stations and the moon-eyed men who directed traffic for them. She had forgotten not only their names, but also their faces.

However, before Bolero could forget Corcoran's, she had to get the *Betty* out of the docking bay.

"So you don't mind releasing us?" she asked.

The traffic officer chuckled and tapped out a few commands on his control panel, ending with a flourish.

*"You're officially clear for departure, Betty."*

That meant the clamps holding the ship in place would depolarize automatically the moment Bolero activated her thrusters. And if all went smoothly, she would be doing that in just a few minutes.

"You're too kind," she said, with just the slightest pang of conscience. *"Betty out."*

Then she sat back and waited.

\* \* \*

Out of the corner of his eye, Johner saw something flying his way. Leaning back, he avoided a chair spinning toward his face.

Unfortunately, he couldn't tell who threw it. *Not that it matters.* Though he had started the knockdown, drag-out that almost instantly took over the mess hall and spilled into the corridor, he had no intention of staying to see the end of it.

Glancing at his wrist chronometer, he confirmed what his inner clock was telling him. *Time to go.*

But a rangy bastard with a bad case of Arethan crater pox seemed to have other ideas. He was stabbing at Johner with his forefinger from across the room, spitting invectives Johner couldn't hear over the tumult.

His brow furrowed. *Wonder if he's the pus-head who threw the chair?*

The guy was still ranting as he came after Johner with a big, wicked-looking knife. No doubt, he thought that gave him an advantage. In fact, Johner had a knife of his own, hidden in his boot.

But on this occasion, he didn't drag it out. He preferred the challenge of going toe-to-toe empty-handed.

*Gotta enjoy the finer things in life*, he mused.

Then he took a couple of strides and met Pox Face in the middle of the room. The guy tried to say hello with a roundhouse swipe, his blade gleaming in the hard, flat light, but Johner saw it coming. Ducking to let the knife pass him by, he straightened and delivered a roundhouse of his own.

Pox Face went sailing with the impact, hit the deck hard, and gave not the slightest sign of getting up again. "Nice doin' business with you," Johner chuckled.

Then he scanned the melee for Vriess and Krakke, found them, and gave them each a look. This was the part where they slipped out of the mess hall just as station security was arriving, giving themselves a chance to make a quick, quiet departure.

*Just the kind Ripley likes*, Johner thought, taking his cigar out of his mouth and replanting it on the other side.

Shoving aside a burly hauler in his way, he hit the doorway about the same time as his cohorts—which was interesting, considering Vriess's wheelchair wasn't made to cut through crowds. But then, the little man always seemed to find a way.

The corridor ahead of them was empty but for the clatter of approaching footfalls. A moment later, a dozen blue-shirted security guards turned the corner, their weapons at the ready.

*Somebody's gonna get shocked*, Johner thought.

But it wouldn't be him or his mates. The mess hall and its ruckus were well behind them, a mere memory now, so there was no reason for the guards to go after them.

They were free as birds. Even Johner, who had never seen a bird except from a considerable distance, could appreciate the sublime

beauty of the metaphor.

He smiled to himself as the guards ran by on either side of them. *Good luck, fellas. Give 'em hell.*

He, Vriess, and Krakke were more than halfway along the corridor when he heard a loud metallic clatter behind them—like a bunch of machine parts falling onto the floor. He scowled, the joy draining out of him. *Don't tell me ...*

Casting a glance back over his shoulder, Johner saw he had been right about the machine parts. They were lying on the deck in a telltale trail behind Vriess's wheelchair.

The damned thing had a secret compartment Vriess used to stow things that weren't his—parts that were needed on the ship, for instance, or solid ammo, or something for the chair itself. And once in a while, the compartment opened when it wasn't supposed to.

*Like now.*

Johner hoped the security guards hadn't noticed—that they were too focused on the job ahead of them. But that hope was dashed when one of the guards turned, pointed to Vriess, and started shouting about a thieving little cripple.

*Crap,* thought Johner.

He reached under his armpits for the shock pistols he kept concealed there for just such an occasion. Then he turned and pumped a barrage at the blueshirts, scattering them.

*At least temporarily,* Johner thought. The guards weren't going to let the matter drop so easily.

"Let's move!" he growled, backing down the corridor as Vriess got his chair moving at full speed.

Krakke knew better than to keep Johner company. The towhead's role was to race ahead of Vriess and clear the way, in case a stray guard managed to stumble into them.

Johner kept up the barrage until they reached the bend in the corridor. Then he squeezed off a few more shots for good measure, and took off after his companions.

“We’ve got ourselves a rendezvous at Immigration!” Vriess shouted back at him, before Johner could inquire.

But then, his chair was rigged with a special-frequency sender-receiver. It was cake for him to get a hold of Ripley and let her know the situation had gone sour.

That was important for two reasons. First, they weren’t about to leave Byzantium without her. Second, Call was the only one capable of springing them from the station.

Unfortunately, the area that controlled personnel flow in and out of Byzantium’s docking bay—affectionately known as Immigration—was the best-guarded part of the station. And by the time Johner and his cohorts arrived, the guards there would be expecting them.

*Not the way we planned it,* Johner thought.

As he entertained that thought, he heard a commotion in the passage he had left behind. Apparently, the guards had gotten up the nerve to come after them. *Somebody oughtta do something about that.*

Turning around and kneeling, he took aim with both burner pistols at the spot where the guards would come barreling around the bend. *If it was me,* he told himself, *I’d stop and take a peek first.* But they were station security, not quantum physicists.

Sure enough, they exploded around the corner without a second thought. And Johner, always glad to impart some practical wisdom, showed them the error of their ways.

One of the guards absorbed a direct hit and catapulted backward. Another took a glancing shot to the shoulder and spun around.

Then, proving they weren't complete morons after all, the lot of them pulled back out of sight.

But they wouldn't stay there for long. And without the element of surprise, Johner wasn't going to get the best of them a second time. So he whirled and started after his comrades, hoping his delaying tactic had bought them enough time.

\* \* \*

Call heard the remarks from the clot of disgruntled haulers before she and Ripley got within fifty meters of it. But unlike everyone else in the crowded corridor, Call knew the source of the haulers' discontent.

Responding to a brawl in the station's mess, a security contingent had run into a bunch of thieves. Though they had failed to nab the miscreants in the skirmish that followed, they were at that very moment in close pursuit.

Predictably, the thieves had chosen Immigration as their destination, hoping to get off Byzantium. But to accomplish that feat, they would have to go through the dozen amply prepared security guards deployed there. And if they tried to go in any other direction, they would find their way barred by a series of centrally controlled corridor barriers.

Of course, the judicious use of a few more barriers would have trapped the thieves in some empty stretch of corridor, precluding the need for a confrontation in heavily trafficked Immigration. However, bad things had come from that sort of strategy on other stations. Call knew because she had downloaded the accounts.

So the Immigration guards would wait for their prey with their burners at the ready. And all the haulers who had shown up at that



hour to return to their ships would be asked to stand back lest they become embroiled in the inevitable firefight.

*And not just for their safety,* Call reflected as she and Ripley reached the outskirts of the crowd. After all, the fugitives might be their friends.

Somehow, Ripley wove her way to the front rank of the assemblage without jostling anyone to the point of offense. Following her, Call saw the guard responsible for keeping the haulers at bay. He didn't look happy with his assignment.

"This shouldn't take long," he said. "We'll be unsealing the area as soon as we can."

"How 'bout if I unseal your *kidneys*?" one of the haulers muttered into his walrus moustache.

"Yeah," said another one, obviously liking the idea. "With something blunt, so we can sell 'em."

*No one ever accused haulers of good manners,* Call mused.

It had bothered her when she first signed on with the *Betty*, all that unnecessary bluster and braggadocio. But now she was used to it. In fact, she took comfort in it, though she would never tell Johner that.

Ripley, for her part, didn't seem to even notice the banter. She was too intent on the guards she could see past the end of the corridor, where it emptied into Immigration.

They were aiming their weapons at something Call couldn't see—the junction where Johner and the others had to show up eventually. No doubt, the guards thought they had the situation in hand.

But Call wouldn't have changed places with them for anything. All they had in their favor were shock rifles. Against the likes of Johner, that might do the trick. Against someone with the blood of aliens pumping in her veins ...

*A different story entirely.*

\* \* \*

Simoni almost shat his pants when he saw her.

*It can't be, he thought, his mind racing furiously. She's goddamned light years from here.*

Yet there she was. There was no mistaking her, no confusing her with someone else. The way she held herself, the way she moved—there was no one else like that in the whole fricking galaxy.

Obviously he had screwed up yet again. But this time, his complete and utter ineptitude had—ironically enough—led him right to the place he wanted to be.

The question was what he should do next. He hadn't expected this, hadn't prepared for it. He needed to think.

*No, he thought, no time for thinking. She may move away at any moment. And I might not catch up with her a second time.*

He could confront her then and there. That was what he had always pictured himself doing—just walking up to her and asking if she would talk with him. But now that he saw the expression on her face, he didn't think she would be amenable to that.

She was looking down the corridor like everyone else. But she seemed more intense, more poised for action. *Coiled, like a snake. She's up to something, he thought, feeling as if he knew her well enough to make that determination. But what is it?*

He was still trying to figure it out when he saw her bolt from the crowd and plow into the security guard. Something happened, a little too quick for Simoni to follow. But when it was done, the guard was stretched out on his back and Ripley was plunging down the corridor, the guard's burner clutched in her hands.

She wasn't alone, either. A pretty, darkhaired woman in a blue jumpsuit was right behind her, matching her stride for stride.

After all the work he had done, all the time he had put in. *Gone*. He couldn't stand the thought of it.

So he did something he never thought he would do, something no sane person would even consider. He ran after Ripley, heading for what promised to be a major burn-fest. And he didn't even have a weapon.

Hell, he had *never* had a weapon.

*Please*, he thought, *don't let me die*. Sprinting the length of the corridor, his bowels feeling as if they were encased in ice, he saw Ripley fire at the security guards while they, in turn, began firing at someone unseen—presumably, the people for whom they had closed down Immigration, though Simoni still didn't know why.

Then, seeing their flank was under attack, some of the guards swiveled around and fired back at Ripley. The corridor sizzled with blue-white burner fire, making the hairs on Simoni's neck stand up. But somehow, the crackle missed him.

Then Ripley was approaching the guards, on top of them, in their midst—her arms and legs flying like weapons, spattering blood and snapping bones. And Simoni was safe, for the time being.

But he couldn't just stand there. He had to go where Ripley was going—her ship, whichever one it was. That was the only reason anyone ever went to Immigration—to get on or off a ship. But he had to get to Ripley's ship before she did, because otherwise she would never let him on.

So Simoni left the melee behind and shot back into the recesses of Immigration, heading for the doors to the station's docking bay. *This is so illegal*, he thought, his heart pound-ing with more than the effort

of running. *If they catch me, it'll be a penal colony for sure, and I would never survive in a penal colony.*

It was only after he had sprinted the echoing, brightly illuminated length of Immigration and, gasping for breath, reached the heavy, octagonal doors to the bay that he realized he hadn't the slightest damned idea how to open them.

# 4

Philip Philipakos read the luminous green warning in the upper right corner of his monitor screen, which was otherwise devoted to lists of humidity readings from one end of the Domes to the other.

"We're getting a visitor," he said, loud enough to be heard over the insect hum of the engines. "With a tube from Domes Gamma."

"How long?" asked his daughter Angie, her voice as light and sweet as always.

"Six or seven minutes. Coming in pretty fast." He frowned. "Must be a hotshot just out of flight school."

"Think Murakami threw in some violets?"

Philipakos cast a look back over his shoulder. "If he knows what's good for him."

His daughter was on the opposite side of the colony's spacious, white disc of a control center, standing at an open stretch of counter between two black computer stations. She was inserting pink-and-white roses into a clear plastic vase, having picked the flowers just that morning in Dome Twelve.

It was difficult for Angie to reach over the lip of the vase, but she managed it by standing on her tiptoes. And of course, her specially

made shoes contributed a couple of extra centimeters to the effort.

Philipakos didn't know why Angie, now twenty-four, was so small—not much more than a meter in height. She had been tested for genetic abnormalities in utero, just like every other fetus in regulated space. But nothing had turned up, so Philipakos and his wife had gone on with the pregnancy.

Their only one, as luck would have it.

After Angie was born and they saw how tiny she was, they subjected her to any number of tests. However, as far as they could tell there wasn't anything wrong with her. Every gland, every organ was functioning perfectly.

She was just little. *Some people are*, one of Angie's physicians had commented, as casually as someone else might have spoken of his cat.

Philipakos could have accepted the doctor's conclusion more easily if anyone else in his family had approximated Angie's stature. Or, for that matter, anyone in his wife's family. But for generations, no one had been less than average height, and some had been well over two meters.

Fortunately, Angie had never been as perturbed by her stature as her father was. As bright as she was, she could hardly have missed the fact that she was different. But she had never complained about it.

Not once.

"You know," said Angie, in that tone of voice that sounded so much like her mother's, "you're too good to that weasel."

Philipakos knew exactly which weasel she was talking about. "He's my friend," he said, not for the first time.

"Still. If he screws up, he should have to face the music like anyone else. By protecting him, you're just making the others resent

him."

It was an old argument, one they'd been having since Angie was a teenager. And Philipakos knew she had a point.

But he had grown up with Benedict in the Chicago centerplex. They had played together, gone to school together, gotten laid together. He couldn't abandon the poor bastard now.

Even if Benedict had gotten too lazy for his own good. Even if he had become a drag on the colony.

Fortunately for Benedict, his friend was the administrator of the facility. Had someone else been in charge, he would have been out on his tailbone a long time ago.

"Your old man's been running this place for a dog's age," Philipakos said. "He knows how to handle Tristan Benedict. And anyone else, for that matter."

Angie shot him a discouraging look. "Too bad he doesn't know how to speak in the first person. Then he'd *really* be impressive."

Seen behind Angie through a concave observation port, the gigantic white oak in Dome Four moved restlessly in the thrice-daily artificial breeze. The tree's elephantine immensity made Philipakos's daughter look even smaller by comparison.

He feigned indignation. "Whatever happened to filial piety?"

"It's still alive and well," said Angie, "back on Earth, where it belongs. Out here in the boonies, it's every man for himself."

Philipakos smiled. *Like her mother indeed.*

"Be an exception to that rule," he said, "and see if you can put together a few pear trees. I think Murakami would consider them just recompense for his trouble."

"Only if he sent Gogolac her violets," Angie stipulated.

Her father chuckled and turned back to his humidity readings. But before he could delve into them again, he heard Angie cry out in

pain.

Before he knew it, he was halfway across the control center, his hands on Angie's arms. "Are you all right?" he asked, his heart slamming in his chest.

"I'm fine," she said, holding up a forefinger. There was a dark red bead of blood on it. "Just stuck myself with a thorn."

Philipakos felt a hot surge of anger at the offending rose, which had fallen onto the counter. It took an effort for him not to grab the flower and crush it.

*Stop it*, he told himself.

He had always been that way about Angie. He couldn't see her injure herself—even in small ways—without a fire rising inside him, burning away all reason.

At times he had taken it out on *her*, as if it were her fault that she had gotten hurt. But he always felt guilty afterward, knowing his outbursts had perhaps inflicted a deeper and more lasting kind of pain.

"Dad ...?" said Angie.

He drew a breath, let it out. "Be careful, for godsakes."

"Hey," she returned with a smile, "botany's a dangerous business. You should know that better than anyone."

And with that, she chased all the anger out of him. Angie had developed a knack for it, in recent years. It was one of the things Philipakos loved most about her: that talent she had for putting everything in perspective.

Again, so like her mother.



# 5

Call sighed, pulled out her fake mole for the second time that day, and flipped open a panel beneath a small yellow readout.

At the moment, all it displayed was three zeros. That would have to change if she and her compatriots wanted to get off Byzantium with their hides relatively intact.

“Hey, Call,” growled Johner.

He and her other companions had posted themselves on either side of the eight-sided entrance to Immigration’s control center, their backs against the wall, their weapons pointed at the ceiling.

“What is it?” asked Call, removing a coil of access cord from the compartment and plugging the end of it into her forearm.

Suddenly, a blue-white energy salvo came whipping through the open doorway, throwing Johner’s seamed features into sharp relief. Ripley and Johner returned fire for a few moments, then pulled back out of sight again.

“You just take your sweet frickin’ time, Call,” said Johner, “and don’t worry about us flesh-and-blood types!”

“Bite me,” Call told him, and entered the data stream.

Thankfully, she wouldn't have to plumb another abyss to open the doors to the holding bay. *Just paddle around near the surface a little.* All she needed was a simple, three-digit password, generated at random twice a day and entrusted only to the guards on duty.

Not that security was such a big deal there. Haulers went back and forth to their vessels every minute of the day. It just made the guards feel better knowing they could deny access.

*To normal people maybe,* Call allowed, rifling through protocols one after the other. *Not a second-generation android.*

Abruptly, she found it—the code that would open the door. “Three-six-two,” she said out loud.

Then she punched it in. *Three. Six. Two.* And somewhere down the corridor, the door opened. Call could hear the creaking sound.

“It's open,” said Ripley, whose hearing was even better than the android's. “Move. I'll cover you.”

No one argued with her. They knew better.

Besides, as good as Johner or Krakke or even Vriess was with a burner, none of them could hold a candle to Ripley in that department. *Or any other,* Call added silently.

“See you on the *Betty*,” Vriess told Call as he trundled by in his chair, following Krakke to the holding bay.

“Not if she sees you first,” said Johner.

Saying goodbye with a couple of bursts through the doorway, he took off after Vriess and Krakke. Then it was just Call and Ripley lingering in the control center.

“Let me know when,” said Ripley.

Eagerly, Call slipped the needle out of her forearm. Leaving the damned thing dangling by its cord, she replaced her mole and glanced at her companion. “Now.”

And she began running in the direction of the docking bay, knowing Ripley was right behind her.

\* \* \*

Bolero stared at Corcoran's face on her vidscreen. "Run that by me again?" she said, manipulating her controls out of his sight as she said it.

*"There's been an incident,"* said Corcoran, his face a lot grimmer than the last time Bolero saw him. *"Some crazy haulers trying to steal station property. I'm sorry, but I've got to withdraw that clearance I gave you—at least until we straighten everything out."*

Bolero knew who those haulers were and what they were up to. And she knew she couldn't wait for her clearance to be reinstated.

"I understand," she told Corcoran, hoping he wouldn't look too closely at the *Betty's* status.

*"Thanks,"* said the traffic officer. *"Corcoran out."*

As his image blinked off the screen, it was replaced by the rear view from Vriess's chair—which showed Bolero that her comrades were on the move again. Ripley and Call were lagging behind—probably because Call needed a moment to unhook herself.

Which meant they would reach the *Betty* in a minute or two, at which point they would want to leave as soon as possible. Bolero wanted that too, more than anything in the galaxy. But Corcoran's clearance withdrawal complicated things a bit.

With a tapped command, she switched the view on her vidscreen. It enabled her to look outward through the *Betty's* open cargo doors and see the ramp that bridged the gap between the docking bay entrance and the ship. It was one of three such ramps in this ninety-degree quadrant of the station's larger bay structure, each one

extending from Immigration to a visiting vessel like a spoke in a mammoth wheel.

Bolero had expected to find the ramp empty, as the first of her comrades was a good thirty seconds away. But someone was halfway across it, headed for the *Betty* at full tilt.

And it wasn't anyone she knew.

"Hey!" she said out loud.

As she watched, the stupid bastard darted through the open cargo doors. Then he veered out of sight, no doubt meaning to conceal himself somewhere.

Once in a while, someone tried to stow away on a cargo hauler—someone desperate. But if the guy knew what the *Betty* was about these days, he would never have considered it.

Unfortunately, it was too late to tell him. And with the others on their way, it was also too late for Rama to eject the stowaway as he might an enterprising rodent.

*Rotten timing*, Bolero thought. She would just have to let it go and sort it out later.

\* \* \*

Simoni had never seen the hold of a cargo hauler, but it was pretty much the way he had always pictured it.

A kraken's nest of black chains hung from the ceiling, creaking with the heavy-looking machine parts that descended from them. Each chain was joined by a quartet of moving shadows, doppelgangers coaxed into being by the harsh light of ceiling fixtures or the glow from ventilation grids in the floor.

The bulkheads were a dead, pale gray, except where rust had blossomed and eaten through the thick, lumpy paint. A cloying, silicon-based scent, strong enough to sting the sinuses on contact,

made Simoni grimace. But mostly he was concentrating on finding a hiding place before anyone came after him.

A stack of shackled containers in the corner of the room looked promising, if only for a moment. Then something else caught his eye and he made that his objective instead.

It was a handle, belonging to a door set into the bulkhead. That suggested a storage compartment, maybe big enough to accommodate a person. If it wasn't already too full, it would probably be the way to go.

Negotiating a path among the hanging chains, Simoni got to the handle as quickly as he could. There wasn't anything tricky about opening it—just a clockwise twist of the wrist and a yank.

Behind the door was a dark, empty space. *Definitely big enough for a guy my size.* He was in luck.

But there was also the matter of getting out again. Simoni didn't want to suffocate to death, giving away his whereabouts only when his corpse started to stink. In the interest of survival, he would leave the compartment door ever so slightly ajar.

Turning about and squatting in front of his hiding place, he inserted one foot behind him and then the other. Next, he slid himself backward until his feet hit the compartment's back wall. Finally, scrunching up just a little, he pulled the door mostly closed.

*There,* he thought, as he narrowed his view of the hold to the thinnest sliver. *Nice and comfy.* And if no one looked too closely, he could stay hidden for as long as he needed.

Suddenly, he heard a series of footfalls, clanking one after another on a metal surface. But not the level Simoni was on—somewhere above him. *A catwalk,* he decided.

The newcomer remained silent for a moment, but Simoni could feel his presence. *He's looking for me. But he's not having any luck.*

"All right," the guy said in a deep, sophisticated drawl— the kind that belonged in the patrician solemnity of a university lecture hall, not the hold of a banged-up old cargo hauler. "You've had some fun, haven't you? But you need to know you've stowed yourself aboard the wrong vessel."

*I don't think so, Simoni mused. I think it's exactly the vessel I want to be on.*

"Our captain," the voice continued, "isn't exactly what you'd call even-tempered. She won't look at your presence here with anything even approaching good humor."

Simoni smiled grimly. *No problem, pal. I'll cross that bridge when I come to it.*

"There's still time to make the wise decision," said the voice, "and vanish before we take off. No harm, no foul, forget our faces and we'll be sure to forget yours."

The guy didn't sound any closer to Simoni than he was before. *Obviously, he has no idea where I am. Looks like I've managed to stuff myself into the right cranny.*

"Last chance," said the voice.

*Shove it, thought Simoni. After what I've been through, you think I'm going to leave just because you tell me to?*

There was an audible sigh. "Fine. Have it your way, *musa*. Just don't say I didn't warn you."

Simoni heard footfalls again, but this time they were in full retreat, and soon they faded into nothingness.

*That was way too easy, he told himself.*

It was as if the guy didn't *care* if Simoni was aboard when they took off. As if it really didn't matter to him.

No doubt, he figured Ripley would take care of it. But that was more than fine with Simoni. Hell, Ripley was the one he wanted to

see.

Settling back into his nook, he closed his eyes and waited for the shiver in the deck plates that accompanied clamp removal. After that, the hauler would be moving under her own power, and there would be no returning him to the station.

And he would come face to face with a legend.

\* \* \*

Mere seconds after Bolero saw the stowaway invade the *Betty*, the trio of Krakke, Vriess, and Johner come roaring onto the ramp. And seconds after that, Call and Ripley followed.

Bolero waited until they were inside, then closed the cargo hatch. Using a toggle switch, she opened an intercom link and said, "Hold on. It's going to get a little rough."

Even as she voiced the warning, she saw a squad of security guards swarm onto the ramp cradling burners. As they got close enough, they started firing blue energy bursts at the *Betty*.

Bolero didn't like the idea. *My pilot's seat, my ship, my damned paint job.* But she knew the barrage would ultimately prove futile. The energy assault couldn't penetrate the vessel's triple-thick hull. At worst, it would short out a light fixture.

"How are we gonna blow the clamps?" Johner asked from down in the cargo bay.

"Already blown," Bolero assured him.

She heard the rash of skepticism that followed and was happy to ignore it. After all, it was true that ships typically sat in their clamps until their crews were aboard, and it was equally true that Corcoran had withdrawn their clearance to leave the station.

No clearance, no clamp release. That was the way it worked.

But as soon as Bolero had gotten an inkling of the trouble they were in, she had inched the *Betty* backward. So by the time Corcoran reactivated the magnetic fields around the clamps, the ship was already clear of them. Except she was hovering so close to the ramp, and maintaining such an even keel, it was impossible for Corcoran or anyone else to figure it out.

It was a trick most pilots wouldn't even have thought of, much less been able to pull off. *Especially with crew about to board.* One miscalculation, one slip, and her com-rades could easily have gotten dumped into the depths of the bay.

But if Bolero were just *any* pilot, she would never have gotten the chance to work with Ripley.

Applying thrusters, she backed off even further from the clamps. Then, like a hawk that had sighted her prey, she dipped her starboard wing and swooped around the section of cylinder extending downward from Immigration, headed for the bottom of the bay.

Two-thirds of the way, the image on Bolero's vidscreen changed. It was her pal Corcoran, and he didn't look happy in the least. "What are you doing?" he demanded.

"Leaving," she said. "Sorry, lover."

"*There's no way out,*" said Corcoran. "*The gates are locked. You can see that for yourself.*"

Indeed, the massive retracting gates at the bottom of the docking bay were closed, blocking the *Betty's* exit. "That would be a problem," said Bolero, "if I didn't have explosive devices that will wreck the gates and shut down your station for months."

The traffic officer went white. "*You wouldn't do that. It's a capital offense.*"



"What the hell," she said. "What's life for if not to take chances?" Accessing the intercom system while maintaining the link with Corcoran, she said, "Got those bombs ready?"

*"Say the word,"* came Johner's response.

Bolero started to respond—but before she could get an entire word out, she heard Corcoran protest. *"All right,"* he said, *"you win. Just give me a moment to evacuate the bay and I'll open the gates."*

"Better move quickly," Bolero advised him. "My pal's got an itchy trigger finger." Then she cut the link.

Naturally, it was all a bluff. They had no explosive devices. If Corcoran didn't blow the gates for them, Call would have to attempt to do so manually—though Bolero had no idea how she would obtain access to station operations.

Fortunately, they had already demonstrated an affinity for violence. With luck, Corcoran would buy what Bolero was selling.

*Come on,* she thought, her eyes on the ponderous, gray gates as she slowed the *Betty's* descent. *Open for me, baby.*

She had just decided that Corcoran was playing her for a fool when a strip of starry space materialized in front of her observation port. As she watched, cheering inwardly, the strip widened, and then widened some more.

*Did it!* she thought.

And once they were out, they were out. Byzantium had no ships it could send after them, its security capabilities limited strictly to the station.

Just then, Ripley entered the cockpit. Bolero smiled back at her. "Looks like clear sailing, Captain."

"Good," said Ripley, taking the seat beside the pilot's.

"By the way," said Bolero, "we've got company."

Ripley looked at her, uncharacteristically surprised. "A stowaway?"

"Never saw him before. Short, skinny, red hair, goofy hat. Obviously didn't know what he was getting into."

Ripley frowned. "Just get us out of here. We'll deal with him afterward."

"Whatever you say," the pilot told her.

By then, the bay gates had parted enough to let them through. Bolero applied thrusters, sat back, and watched the opening grow closer in her observation port.

She was less than fifty meters from freedom when the gates started to close again. "What the *hell* ... ?" she said out loud.

Two possibilities occurred to her. One was that Corcoran had changed his mind out of spite. The other was that he had been overridden by a higher authority.

Either way, it wouldn't get her anywhere to reopen negotiations. She had only one option—to shoot the gap.

Pouring on maximum thrust, Bolero felt the *Betty* shiver as if she were coming apart. Still, the pilot could see she wasn't going to make it. Not at her present angle, anyway. The gates were closing too quickly, like the jaws of a great, dark leviathan, and she was already too wide to fit through them.

Her only chance was to rotate—and quickly. Punching in a command, she spun the *Betty* a hundred and eighty degrees to starboard, presenting her ship's narrowest dimension to the diminishing aperture. Then she gritted her teeth and kept her eyes on the stars that were still visible.

*Don't be mean to me*, she thought as she plunged ahead.

For a moment, Bolero was certain they were screwed. By far, the worst part was the feeling she had let Ripley down.

Then they were sailing through open space, a billion stars winking all around them. Somehow the leviathan's jaws had missed them, chomping down on nothingness.

With a deep, earnest sigh of relief, Bolero established a heading and left Byzantium behind.

## 6

As the door to Simoni's compartment opened, his eyes were blasted by an onslaught of light. But he could still make out the face that presented itself in the opening— a surprisingly boyish one, with pale blue eyes framed by straw-colored hair.

"Hi there," said Simoni. "Allow me to—"

Before he could finish, a hand reached in and grabbed him by the front of his tunic. Then it dragged him out of the compartment and left him lying on the deck like a freshly caught fish.

Simoni looked around and saw that the blond kid wasn't the only one sharing the cargo hold with him. There were several others—six of them altogether—frowning as they regarded him in the twisted shadows of the hanging chains.

Except for one guy—a fellow with a long jaw, an apelike brow ridge and a collection of scars decorating his face. He wasn't frowning at all. In fact, he seemed amused.

Uncomfortably so.

But the face that caught Simoni's eye and held it was Ripley's. As he watched, spellbound, she separated herself from her companions and approached him, finally kneeling in front of him.

Ripley, he thought. *Goddamn.*

It was intoxicating to see her so close ... *so real*. She was even more impressive than he had imagined, even more riveting.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, her voice hard and without inflection.

He licked his lips. "I wanted to go along with you."

Her nostrils flared. "Why?"

"Because you're Ellen Ripley," said Simoni. "The Ellen Ripley in *Morse* and the other banned histories, though I can't explain how. And whatever you're up to, it's got to be something important."

As she considered him, her head tilting slightly to one side, he had the strangest feeling that she was thinking about *eating* him. *But that's crazy—isn't it?*

"You're holding something back," she decided. "You've got ten seconds to tell me what it is, or you're leaving."

He was about to remind her that they were in space. If he left the ship, he would pop like an overripe zit. Then he realized that was exactly what she had in mind.

Simoni swallowed. *She won't do it. She's bluffing.*

He waited the ten seconds, watching her. Finally, she glanced at the ape man and said, "Get rid of him."

"With pleasure," he grated.

Simoni put a hand up to ward him off, but it didn't do him any good. The bastard was too quick, too strong. He slammed Simoni into the bulkhead hard enough to bring the tang of blood to his mouth, then grabbed him by the collar and yanked him in the direction of a waste disposal hatch.

It wasn't very big. But it was big enough to accommodate a human being if—like Simoni—he wasn't too bulky. Or if he didn't mind getting a layer of skin ripped off.

"Wait," he yelped back at Ripley, "I'll tell you!"

But she had already turned and started walking away. The others too. Only the blond kid stood there watching Johner drag Simoni away, and he wasn't making a move to do anything about it.

"You hear me?" Simoni bellowed, his voice banging in the confines of the hold. "I said I'll *tell* you!"

The ape man chuckled like evil incarnate. "Too late."

It was insane. Simoni tried to loosen his tormentor's grip, to twist free. It wasn't helping. *I can't die like this*, he insisted. *Not after everything I've been through.*

"Goddammit," he said, his voice thinning to a scream, "I'm a net reporter! I just wanted a freakin' story!"

The admission didn't affect the ape man in the least. But Ripley halted in her tracks and turned around.

"You're gonna like it out there," the ape man said gleefully as he pulled Simoni along. "For a few seconds, anyway."

Ripley stopped one of her comrades—the woman in the blue jumpsuit—and said something to her, but Simoni couldn't make it out. He was grunting too loudly as he tried to pry his captor's powerful fingers loose.

"Watch the pinky," the ape man growled, jerking Simoni forward, "or I swear, you'll be dead before you hit the black!"

Simoni focused on Ripley again. She was looking at him, exchanging comments with her comrade.

"Last stop," said the ape man.

Still holding Simoni by the collar, he used his other hand to poke at the hatch controls. Swiveling so his feet were between him and his tormentor, Simoni lashed out with his heel and kicked his captor in the mouth.

It didn't seem to faze the ugly bastard in the least. Finishing the hatch control sequence, he got the cover to swivel open. Beyond it was a dark, empty tube.

Without warning, the ape man slugged Simoni in the face. It took all the fight out of the reporter, left him a limp bag of bones. The next thing he knew, he was being jammed face first into the waste tube.

"Nooo!" Simoni screamed.

He tried to hook his feet around the hatch, but the ape man wasn't having any of it. With one bone-jarring thrust after another, he stuffed the intruder through the opening.

"Nooo!" Simoni screamed again, his cries muffled by the closeness of the tube.

It was hard to breathe, so hard, and the ape man hadn't even locked the door yet. And it would get even harder when the door by Simoni's head swung open and he was puffed out into space.

He had heard what happened to people out there. The heat leached out of them in a matter of seconds. Their eyes bled. Their lungs burst like overripe fruit.

Simoni didn't want that to happen to him.

"Please," he shrieked, his pulse pounding in his ears so hard it hurt, "I'll do anything! Just don't make me go out there!"

But his cries fell on deaf ears. The ape man began forcing the hatch door closed, despite Simoni's efforts to kick it open.

*Oh god, he thought, it's really happening ...*

Then he heard someone say, in a clear and distinct voice, "Let him go."

The ape man stopped pushing the door closed and said, "Gotta clean my ears one of these days. For a second there, I thought you said to let him go."

"I did," came the answer, which Simoni now recognized was Ripley's.

The ape man let the door to the tube swing open, allowing the reporter a glimpse of the cargo bay. "You *cannot* be serious," he snarled. "You're gonna let this sneaky scumbag *live*?"

Ripley didn't say anything in response. But then, she had already given him an answer.

By then, Simoni had wriggled out of the tube and was pouring himself onto the deck. He looked at the ape man with trepidation, hoping he would listen to Ripley.

The ape man cursed to himself. Then he whirled and grabbed Simoni and pulled the reporter's face close to his—so close that Simoni could smell the alcohol on his captor's breath.

Then the ape man said, "Don't let me catch you underfoot, scumbag. Not even once. Because I would like nothing better than to stomp on you till your head pops."

"I understand," said Simoni, too exhausted to think of anything else.

His tormentor glared at him a while longer. Finally, he thrust the reporter away and headed for the exit, muttering, "The crap I have to put up with ... "

Simoni watched him go. Then he looked to Ripley, meaning to thank her for her intervention.

But she no longer seemed interested in him. With a word to the woman in the blue jumpsuit, she followed the ape man out of the hold.

Swallowing, Simoni stared at the woman. To his surprise, she smiled, walked back across the hold, and gave him her hand.

"Come on," she said, helping him to his feet. "I'll try to find you a place to sleep."



\* \* \*

"Easy," said Gogolac, watching the insertion margins represented by the bright red lines on her monitor. "We had some trouble with the in-box last time."

*"I hear you, ma'am,"* said the pilot of the ungainly looking, brown supply ship, visible to Gogolac through a nearby observation port, *"and I aim to please."*

At the same time, he slowed the progress of his vessel's extender arm, which was moving the silver-blue cryo tube in its grasp closer to the maw of the colony's cargo bay.

"Friendly," observed Philipakos, "isn't he?"

He was completing his environmental checks on the other side of the command center, but he had stopped to watch Gogolac accept the tube. *Not that he doesn't trust me,* she thought. In all the years she had worked under him, she had never once given him cause for complaint.

On the other hand, the bay's receiving unit *had* malfunctioned the last time—albeit on Seigo's watch, not hers—and compromised a food shipment. And they didn't get food shipments anywhere nearly as often as they used to, so it would be a while before anyone forgot the incident.

Worse, they hadn't had the right parts on hand to repair the unit. *We never do,* Gogolac reflected. So it had to be jerry-rigged, which was, no doubt, why Philipakos seemed so concerned.

"A lot more friendly than the last couple," she said. "But he still has to put a round peg in a square hole."

*With my help, of course.* It took two to perform the peculiar tango of supply insertion. And though she hadn't been asked to dance since she was eleven, it was a step she was good at.

Unlike the one Gogolac had taken that time with Hamilton-Cross. But then, she hadn't expected much to come of that relationship. Men liked women who looked nice, and she hardly fit that description.

"Rotate ten degrees clockwise," she told the pilot.

*"No sooner said than done,"* he told her.

Gogolac couldn't see the guy's face from this angle, but she imagined he was a good ol' boy with fresh-scrubbed cheeks and a brush haircut. Over the years, she had gotten good at imagining men—putting them together from a voice or just a written report.

Like Saturria, the guy in Domes Alpha. All she knew of him was what she heard in his updates. But she imagined him to be darkly complected, cheerful, and generous in his dealings with women.

*A little generosity goes a long way,* Gogolac thought, as she watched the pilot make the ten-degree adjustment.

A moment later, the tube slipped into the aperture Gogolac had prepared for it. *Mission accomplished.*

"I don't suppose you've got any extra food containers on that rig?" she asked hopefully.

*"One,"* said the pilot, releasing his hold on the tube. *"Unfortunately, it's earmarked for Delta. Sorry about that."*

"No need to be," Gogolac told him. "It's not your fault we haven't seen meat in more than a year."

*"A year's a long time,"* he said, withdrawing his extender arm. *"I'll put in a good word for you with the brass. They listen to guys like me all the time."*

Gogolac found herself laughing—too rare an occurrence. "Yes, I'll just bet they do."

*"See you around, ma'am."*

Reluctant to see the guy go, she watched as he pulled his ship back, wheeled, and then took off. With a sigh, she returned her attention to the cargo bay. Her monitors told her the tube was secure, awaiting human attention.

“Nice guy,” Philipakos observed.

“He was,” Gogolac allowed.

Usually, supply runs attracted peculiar people—even more peculiar than the ones who operated botanical colonies. But this one was different.

“I hope,” said Philipakos, “that my Angie meets someone like that one day.”

*Not around here, she won’t, Gogolac reflected. None of us will.*

Not that it mattered, really. She did better with men she could only dream about.

\* \* \*

Call was lying on the top bunk in the quarters she shared with Ripley and Bolero, propped up on one elbow, when she heard the sound of someone coming down the corridor.

As slender as Ripley looked, her muscles alone weighed more than Johner’s whole body, and the sound of her boots striking the deck reflected the fact. Except, of course, when she wanted to move silently—but this wasn’t one of those times.

Call turned and laid the back of her head on her pillow, facing the image of a female bathing suit model she had downloaded and pasted on the ceiling. It was the most perfect example of feminine beauty she had ever seen— even more so than the picture of Betty Grable painted on the *Betty’s* hull.

Not that she could ever look that way. *But I can dream, can’t I? Figuratively, at least.*

Ripley's shadow preceded her into the room. "So," she said, taking the only chair in the place and turning it around so she could straddle it, "what did you get?"

Call glanced at her. "You really want to know?"

Ripley's eyes narrowed. "Is that an actual question? Or are you just trying to piss me off?"

"Piss you off," Call said without hesitation.

Ripley tilted her head a little, her mouth pulling almost imperceptibly at the corners. "Feeling taken for granted, are we?"

"A little, yes. No—make that a lot."

"Sorry, but it's not exactly balloons and birthday candles for any of us. Not in *this* business."

Call knew Ripley wasn't talking about hauling cargo. "Still. If you knew what it was like to go in there ... "

"Next time I'll attempt to be more sympathetic. So what the hell did you get?"

The android sighed. With all Ripley could do, it was difficult to think of her in terms of limitations. But she had some big ones.

"I got it all," Call said, suppressing an urge to pump her fists in the air.

Ripley's brow furrowed. "All? As in *everything*?"

"As in we don't have to sneak into data centers anymore. Which, come to think of it, is a good thing in a lot of ways, considering Byzantium will be spreading the word about us."

"You're sure about this?"

"Pretty much," said Call. "I'm still processing—there's a lot to work on. But I ought to have coordinates within the hour."

"And then we go to work," said Ripley. She took on a faraway look. "Hard to believe, after all this time."

It *was* a little hard to believe.

But Call was ready for it. *Big* time.

\* \* \*

Simoni wasn't the most popular soul on the *Betty*, but he managed to find one crewman who wasn't put off by his company.

"In a way," he said, continuing a monologue he had begun several minutes earlier, "I don't mind your not talking much. It's better than the muttered comments I hear from Johner. In case it's escaped your attention, I'm not on his Christmas list."

Krakke didn't say anything in response. He just continued dismantling the shock rifle in his hands—one of a dozen he had earlier laid out on the metal table in front of him.

*Ch-chunk.*

Simoni wondered if the lighting in the ship's armory was always this low. If he were the one taking guns apart and putting them back together, he would have turned the illumination up a little.

But it didn't seem to bother Krakke. He just went about his appointed task, as uncomplaining as a man could be.

*Ch-chunk.*

The reporter in Simoni wondered about the guy. Was it that he couldn't talk or just didn't feel like it? If it was the former, how had he been deprived of speech? And how had he gotten so expert at constructing shock rifles?

*The military?* Krakke didn't look like the military type, with his long hair and stubbly chin beard. But then, he might not have always looked that way.

*Things to ponder,* Simoni thought.

But Krakke wasn't the main thing on his mind. "Tell me," he said, "what's going on around here? Seems to me there's a lot of activity. A lot of whispering."

Krakke kept on doing what he was doing. But he shot the writer a look that indicated he had at least heard the question.

"Everybody seems excited about something. Not happy exactly, but excited. Like something big is going to happen."

The blond man turned a metal-alloy barrel toward him and blew into its aperture. Then he fit it into the body that went with it.

*Ch-chunk.*

"My guess," said Simoni, "is it has something to do with what happened at Byzantium. But I'm at a disadvantage there, because I don't know what it was."

*Ch-chunk.*

"If this was a regular cargo hauler, and you and your friends had to leave Byzantium in a hurry, I'd say you stole something. But I can't see the legendary Ellen Ripley running from border station to border station just to steal stuff."

*Ch-chunk.*

"So it's more than that. But what? What would a station have that Ripley would want? I'm guessing it's information."

*Ch-klank.*

For the first time since Simoni entered the room, Krakke failed to make a perfect fit. It showed in his expression.

"That's it," said Simoni, "isn't it? You were there after information. And what kind of information would Ripley find valuable? Only one kind, I think."

Krakke tried to fit the components together again, but this time he was more deliberate. And they came together perfectly.

*Ch-chunk.*

"Because," said the writer, "when you come right down to it, there's really only one thing in which Ripley is interested—and that's the alien species she's been fighting all her life."

Krakke neither confirmed nor denied it. He just slotted it in another component.

*Ch-chunk.*

“But now that I think about it,” said Simoni, “a border station wouldn’t *have* information on the aliens. At least, not directly. So what kind of *indirect* information would it have?”

That was the question. But try as he might, Simoni couldn’t come up with the answer.

And Krakke didn’t give him any help. He just kept playing with his shock rifles as if they were the only things in his life, the only things that gave him any satisfaction.

“Well,” said Simoni, “nice talking with you.”

\* \* \*

Benedict shaded his eyes from the blaze of naked sunlight as he gave the twenty-meter-high mahogany tree the once-over. *One hundred twenty-six*, he counted. *One hundred twenty-seven. One hundred twenty-eight.*

Wait—there was one more bundle of splay-fingered green leaves projecting from the side of the mahogany’s light gray trunk. *One hundred twenty-nine.*

Benedict recorded the data on his handheld computer and moved on to the next mahogany tree. *Nothing like counting Staghorn ferns to spice up your morning*, he thought wearily.

Unfortunately, his friend Philip was big on maintaining meticulous inventories of the plant life they had in each dome. *As if it really matters how many of the little buggers have stuck themselves up there.*

The ferns weren’t even parasites. They just affixed themselves to the bark of their favorite hardwoods and drew their nutrition from

the air. *Best hangers-on a fellow could ask for.*

So a few more or less of them shouldn't have made a difference. However, Philip didn't see it that way. Every month, Benedict and a couple of the other botanists had to roam the domes counting this bit of green stuff or that.

It was enough to make a fellow insane.

Fortunately, there was one saving grace to the job. This, as luck would have it, was the dome where Benedict had found that especially luscious stand of sinjaba. And as soon as he was done with his inventory-taking, he would again seek out the specimen's hallucinogenic goodness.

Looking up at the next tree, he pinpointed its location on his computer's Dome-Five grid. Then he continued his Staghorn count, starting with the topmost and working his way down.

He had added three to his total when he heard a huffing sound. Pausing in his chore, he looked around—and saw something lurking under a generously proportioned frond.

A big, black Labrador retriever.

The beast was panting as he regarded Benedict, his long pink tongue hanging halfway to the ground. Obviously, he had been running around a bit.

His name was Rex. *Not a very inspired name*, Benedict thought. In fact, it could hardly have been *less* inspired.

But Colin Hamilton-Cross, Rex's owner, hadn't been an especially inspirational individual. All Benedict recalled about him were his oddly pear-shaped body and his thick, dark moustache.

Hamilton-Cross hadn't ever said anything sarcastic or funny, hadn't ever done anything requiring extraordinary insight or courage—or cruelty, for that matter. He had just been there, day in and day out, like the decks and the bulkheads.



Until one day he was found sprawled in an orange grove, the victim of a massive, entirely unforeseen heart attack.

After that, everyone chipped in a little when it came to caring for Rex. But as he didn't really belong to anybody, he was left pretty much on his own.

It had been Philip's idea to program the doors so that Rex could wander unfettered from dome to dome. And the dog had rewarded the decision by demonstrating a very undoglike respect for the flora with which he was surrounded.

So it worked out for everyone.

"Hello, boy," said Benedict, not because he was especially happy to run into Rex but because the animal was looking at him so expectantly. "How are tricks?"

Rex walked up to Benedict, sat down, and offered his paw. The gesture was Hamilton-Cross's legacy—perhaps his only one.

Chuckling, Benedict accepted the proffered appendage. "I didn't mean that literally, you know."

The dog yipped suddenly, startling the botanist. Then he yipped again. Less than pleased, Benedict launched a kick at Rex, but the dog eluded it.

"Dumb shit," he said, not caring how cruel he sounded. "You're going to make *me* have a heart attack."

Then Benedict noted the angle of the dog's gaze, and realized Rex wasn't looking at him at all. He was looking *past* him—at something the botanist couldn't see.

Normally, it took a lot to make Benedict move. However, there was something about the intensity of Rex's stare that made the hairs stand up on the back of his neck.

Whirling, he saw ... *nothing at all*. Just a few heavy, leaf-laden branches waving lazily in the periodic, man-made breeze. *Idiot*, he

thought, angry with himself. He hadn't allowed himself to get spooked like that since he was a child.

Back on Earth, in the plex where he had grown up, there were things that could harm a person—people who eked out their living preying on the weak and innocent.

But this was as far from Earth as one could get, both literally and figuratively. There was nothing that could hurt Benedict, nothing that could sneak up behind his back.

*It's the damned dog*, he thought, blaming the incident on the look he saw in Rex's eyes. *He's got to mellow the hell out.*

Then he got an idea. A wicked one, if he said so himself.

"My good friend Rex," he said, "let me introduce you to my other good friend. His name is sinjaba. I think the two of you will get on famously together."

Of course, there was the chance that Rex wouldn't like the taste of the leaves. But hell, he seemed to like the taste of everything else people fed him.

*Only one way to find out*, Benedict thought. Ripping off a sinjaba leaf, he said "Come here, boy."

Dutifully, Rex came closer. And when the botanist offered him the leaf, the dog just as dutifully ate it.

Benedict smiled. "There," he said. "Now we're all friends together. Isn't that cozy?"

Just then, his comm unit started vibrating in his pocket. No doubt, it was Philip trying to get an update on the fern inventory.

"I'm busy," Benedict said, letting the unit buzz until it was tired of buzzing.

Then he sat down, placed his back against the curving trunk of a palm tree, and waited eagerly for the fun to begin.

Call plucked a playing card from her hand and laid it on the table face down. "I'll take one," she said.

Johner looked up at her from beneath his overhanging brow, in the shadow of which his eyes looked like slick, black stones. "One?" he echoed in disgust.

She returned his scrutiny without expression. "Got a hearing problem all of a sudden?"

Johner's lip curled. Then he laid down some cards of his own and said, "Two. And they'd goddamn better be the *right* two."

To Johner's left, Vriess frowned as he contemplated his hand. Then he frowned some more.

"We're growing old here," said Johner. "It's your legs that are paralyzed, not your brain."

"Shut up," said Vriess, still intent on his cards. "It's called thinking. Try it some time."

Johner made a sound of disdain and leaned back in his chair. "Yeah, you thinking. That's a good one."

Ripley, who was leaning on the bulkhead and staring out the mess hall's observation port, seemed oblivious to the exchange at the table. But as Call knew, Ripley was acutely aware of everything, from the musical clink of chains in the cargo bay to the beating of their respective hearts.

Meanwhile, Vriess was still weighing his options. At length.

Rama's normally composed features looked strained. "This," he said, "is why we should impose a time limit."

"Why?" Call asked reasonably. "Are you going somewhere?"

"That's not the point," said Rama. "We could play three hands in the time it takes Vriess to toss out a card."

"Go play somewhere else then," said Vriess, his expression becoming more and more pained as he studied his hand. "Who

needs you? Call and I can take care of the engines, and Krakke can walk around with a stick up his ass. We won't even know you're gone."

Johner laughed out loud. It wasn't a pleasant sound by any means. "Now that's funny."

"No," said Rama, "it's cruel and insulting. A subtle difference to someone like yourself, perhaps, but a significant one nonetheless."

"Screw yourself," said Johner. "How's that for being subtle?"

Rama turned to Call. "Can I appeal to *you*, at least, for some semblance of a rational perspective?"

"Fraid not," said the android.

The engineer nodded. "It's all right. I would have been disappointed if you had said otherwise."

"I'll take three!" Vriess announced triumphantly, and threw that many cards down on the table.

"The gods are kind," said Rama. He discarded some of his cards as well. "I'll also take three. And I'll do it while I'm still young enough to deal."

He was in the process of doing that when Simoni walked into the room. Seeing what the others were up to, he didn't say anything. He just folded his arms across his chest and watched.

"One for Call," said Rama. "Two for Johner. Three for Vriess, and three for me. Read 'em and weep, compadres."

Call watched her comrades' faces as they checked out their cards. Of course, they knew better than to give anything away.

Next, she looked at her own cards. She had gotten a deuce to go with her pairs of eights and nines. *No help*, she thought.

Reaching for her stack of old-fashioned ceramic chips, which she had purchased years earlier from a shopping channel, she tossed a few into the pile in the center of the table. "Three."

Johner grinned and dug into his own holdings. "Tell you what, little girl. I'll see your three and raise you five." And he slid his chips in one at a time.

"You're bluffing," said Rama.

The big man's grin faded a little. "I never bluff."

Vriess laughed. "You *always* bluff."

Johner's brow lowered. "Bet, you little shit."

Vriess slid his chips in one at a time as well, in mockery of Johner. "I'll see it, asshole."

Suddenly Johner whirled, his chair crashing to the deck, and grabbed Simoni by the front of his shirt. Then he raised him off his feet and slammed him against a bulkhead.

"What the hell!" Simoni squealed.

"Peeking at my cards," Johner rumbled, "is that what you were doing? Peeking at my goddamned cards?"

"Hey," said Call, "let him go!"

"He was looking at my cards!" Johner growled, as if that were explanation enough.

"Come on," said Vriess, "give him a break!"

"It's just a game," Rama said.

"This little creep was looking at my *cards*!" Johner repeated in a spasm of anger, pushing Simoni farther and farther up the bulkhead.

Simoni began sputtering and his face turned beet-red. It seemed Johner was cutting off his air supply.

Call got up to intervene, as did Rama. But before they could get around the table, Ripley turned from the observation port.

"Leave him alone," she told Johner.

Johner turned an angry, red eye on her. "Why? Why's it so important to you to keep the little sonuvabitch around?"

"That's my business," said Ripley.

"It's *our* business," Johner insisted. "We're in this together, remember?"

"You're free to leave," she told him.

He looked indignant. "Are you shitting me? You'd rather have the sneak than *me*?"

Ripley looked at Johner, her features taut with emotion. She didn't say yes, of course, because that would have been the last they saw of him. But she also wasn't giving in when it came to the stowaway.

Johner had to understand part of that: it wasn't in Ripley's nature to give ground. But there was another reason for her orneriness, a reason of which Johner wasn't aware.

"All right," he said, the muscles in his jaw rippling, "have it your way. I just hope he doesn't bite us in the ass."

Then he stalked off through the open door.

Vriess looked around the table, a disgusted look on his face. "Three-handed poker?"

"Game's over," said Call, stating the obvious.

"Brilliant timing," said Rama. He laid his cards down on the table one at a time—first the five of hearts, then the six, then the seven, eight, and nine. "Just brilliant."

"Sorry," Simoni rasped.

Rama smiled a thin smile. "Don't worry about it. It's not your fault you're a pain in the ass."

Call would have rebuked Rama for his remark except for one thing: he was right. Simoni *was* a pain in the ass.

It was only the fact that she was something of a pariah herself that kept her from feeling any resentment toward him.

## 7

Simoni leaned against the bulkhead beside his bunk, removed his personal computer from his pocket, and activated its audio-receive capability. Then, taking advantage of the fact that neither Rama nor Krakke was around, he began speaking.

"Day Three aboard the good ship *Betty*," he said, his voice sounding tinny in the confines of the room. "Lots of whispering and furtive glances. Everybody's in on some big goddamned secret, but no one wants to tell me about it."

*At least partly because they hate my guts*, Simoni thought. But he didn't say that.

Simoni had begun making daily entries in his journal years earlier, long before he began his pursuit of Ripley. Nothing long or complicated, just a marker to show him afterward where he had been.

At first it had been a chore for him, something he did because it seemed like a good idea. Then, so gradually he hadn't realized it, it became a comfort—an element of familiar routine in an otherwise transient existence.

And lately it had become even more than that. If he didn't make his journal entry, he felt hollow, disoriented, as if something was missing from his life.

"Of course," said Simoni, "it's only a matter of time before I figure things out. These people may think they can keep me in the dark indefinitely, but they don't know me."

He was choosing his next words when he heard the door scrape open. Putting his computer away and looking down past the edge of his bunk, he saw that he had a visitor.

It was Ripley.

He tried to read her expression but he couldn't. She always looked like she was trying to decide between smiling and tearing his head off, and this time was no exception.

"What can I do for you?" he asked.

The first time Ripley saw him, back in the cargo hold, she had tilted her head to look at him the way a dog would. She did that again, her eyes boring into his.

"Why do you do this?" she asked abruptly.

Simoni looked at her. "You mean ... *write* about things?"

Ripley nodded.

He shrugged. "It's what I do. What I've always done, ever since I was a little kid."

"But *why*?" she asked.

Simoni had never really thought about it. "Why do you want to know?" he countered.

Ripley scowled, a flare of anger in her eyes. Then she turned and started to leave.

Suddenly, he realized the stupidity of what he had done. Ripley was his only leverage on the ship, the only thing that stood between him and Johnner—and he had pissed her off.



"Wait!" he said, dropping off the bunk and going after her. "I'm sorry! Please!"

She stopped in her tracks and glared at him. She was waiting, but she didn't seem inclined to wait very long.

*So why do you write?* Simoni asked himself.

"I guess," he said, "it's because I like it when people listen to me. Hardly anybody did that when I was growing up, except when I knew something they didn't. So I found things out and had some fun talking about them. I still do."

It surprised him that he could figure it out so quickly. But then, the answers seemed to be lying there just below the surface, waiting for him to pluck them out.

"For fun?" Ripley echoed.

"More or less," he said. "I mean, I get paid too. Pretty well sometimes, depending on what I come back with."

Her nostrils flared. "And this time, you were going to come back with *me*."

*Well, yeah,* Simoni thought. But he didn't believe it would be a good idea to say so. On the other hand, silence didn't seem like such a good idea either.

"That's right," he said at last

She stared at him for a long time, making him wonder what she was going to do to him. But in the end, she didn't do anything. She just turned and left, leaving Simoni feeling exactly as she had found him.

Unsatisfied.

\* \* \*

As Elijah Pandor manipulated the controls of the freestanding console in the center of the colony's supply bay, he reflected that he

wasn't the sort of man to be bothered by someone else's shortcomings—even when that some-one was as presumptuous and irresponsible as Tristan Benedict.

So when Pandor got the call to check out the cryo tube from Gamma, he agreed to do it, no questions asked. Even though he knew Benedict had been asked to do it first.

It wasn't the first hook Benedict had managed to wriggle off and it wouldn't be the last—not as long as Philip insisted on treating his old friend better than he treated his other colleagues. Pandor didn't understand it. Benedict wasn't any nicer to Philip than he was to anyone else, but Philip continued to coddle him.

This time, at least, there was a bright side to Benedict's shenanigans. Instead of replacing filters in the ventilation ducts, as Pandor did every six weeks to the day, he would be the first to see what goodies Gamma had sent them.

With that enticement in mind, he watched as the doors to the airlock below him swung open, allowing a metal-alloy cradle to elevate until it came flush with the deck. The silver cryo tube, which was secure in the cradle's embrace, glinted in the light from the overheads.

Still working at his console, Pandor unfolded a pair of mechanical claws from the ceiling and used them to relieve the cradle of its burden. Then he had the claws pivot on their ball-and-socket joints and place the tube on a stainless steel gurney.

Even before the cradle finished descending into the airlock and the claws finished retracting into the ceiling, Pandor was peering at the red-lettered readout that served as the tube's manifest.

*Violets*, he thought, noting the first item on the list. Gogolac would be happy. She had a thing for violets—said they reminded her of a man she had once dated.

Not that Pandor believed Gogolac had ever dated anyone, in the presence of violets or anything else. However, he wasn't going to be the one to cast doubt on the woman's story. There was enough friction in a colony as it was, enough bickering over things that hardly mattered. The last thing he wanted to do was add to it.

Pressing a dark blue stud beside the readout, he deactivated the cryogenic system that had preserved the plants in transit. Then he pressed a second stud, this one a bright green, to open the tube.

As the hatch swung open, there was a soft exhalation of moist, fragrant air. *Yes*, the botanist thought, *definitely violets*. It was only after the hatch was open all the way that he saw there was something else inside besides plants.

It was on the end of the tube to his right. An ovoid, almost too big for the space the tube could afford it. It was blue-black in color and leathery in texture, with ridged patterns running from top to bottom. At first, it seemed to the botanist that it was a melon of some kind.

Then he reconsidered.

Because as he looked on, something happened to the top of it. The leathery surface began to split in an x-shape, as if some invisible knife were slicing it open. Then the resulting flaps—all four of them—folded back at the same time, revealing something inside.

It was white and sticky-looking. And lumpy. Pandor bent over to get a better look at the stuff.

"What have we here?" he asked out loud.

Suddenly, something leaped up at him from the ovoid, clamping itself over his face. Staggering backwards, he felt himself falling, felt his head hit something hard.

*Get it off!* he thought, and tried to rip it away with his hands.

But it wouldn't be dislodged. The harder he tugged, the harder it fought to maintain its grip.

A spurt of panic rising in his throat, Pandor gave into it and started to scream. But he had to stop almost as soon as he started—because something was trying to force its way into his mouth.

*No!* he thought desperately, knowing he would choke to death if he let it get inside.

Despite the way the thing clung to his face, he was able to draw air through his nostrils and down his throat. *This will work*, he assured himself. *If I can breathe, I can last until someone finds me.*

Pandor was beginning to find comfort in that hope when he felt a terrible pressure around his throat. It was as if someone were trying to strangle him. Someone *powerful*.

Frantic, he moved his hands down to where the pressure was and felt a hard, muscular tendril. Clawing at it, he attempted to loosen it so he could breathe again.

But it wouldn't give an inch. It kept strangling Pandor, kept starving him for life-giving breath. Finally, he couldn't keep his lips pressed together anymore. He had to part them, if only a little, and try to drag oxygen down his tortured windpipe.

*Only a little ...*

But it was enough for the thing digging at his mouth to insinuate itself between his lips. Too late, he tried to clamp them down again. But by then, the thing had forced its way inside and was filling his mouth with its hard, insistent probing.

Pandor began to gag, his body reflexively trying to repel the invader. But it didn't do him any good. And a moment later, drowning in horror and lightheaded from lack of air, he felt the appendage slither snakelike down his throat.

*Ohmygod*, he thought, *get it out, please get it out—*

\* \* \*

Simoni was sitting on his bunk, talking to a sleeping Krakke—who wasn't much more taciturn than a waking Krakke—when Call poked her head into the room.

"Hey, Simoni," she said. "Come with me."

He didn't feel much like getting off his bunk. But he got the distinct impression that Call wanted to tell him something—and if that was the case, he was more than willing to listen.

"Where are we going?" he asked, dropping to the deck.

"The cargo bay," Call told him. "I've got some work to do, some welding. On a ship like this, there's always some damned thing that needs welding."

He would take her word for it.

Call didn't say anything as they made their way aft along the ship's main corridor. Simoni didn't either, at least until they got to the cargo bay.

"In the interests of full disclosure," he said without preamble, "I don't know the first thing about this stuff. So if you think I'm going to be helpful at all—"

"I don't," said Call, putting that concern to rest.

"Then I'm here for ... some other reason?" Simoni asked hopefully.

Call didn't answer. Instead, she went over to a control board set into the bulkhead and drew her finger across a touch-sensitive screen, which caused an empty metal table to slide across the room on a recessed track.

*Patience*, he told himself.

"The other day," Call said at last, "Ripley asked you about your writing. You wanted to know why."

Simoni felt a pang of reporter's curiosity in his gut. "That's right," he responded, but not too eagerly.

With a pull of a toggle switch, she lowered a chain holding a piece of heavy machinery—something Simoni couldn't have identified in a thousand years—until it settled onto the table. Then she moved to the table and unfastened the chain.

"It probably struck you as odd," said Call, "that she would give a damn."

"Well," Simoni told her, "in all honesty, it did. She seems pretty focused on what's important to her, and I was sure I didn't fall into that category."

"Strictly speaking," said Call, "you don't."

Crossing the room to a compartment like the one the reporter hid in when he came aboard, Call removed a mask and a laser torch. Donning the former and igniting the latter, she approached the troublesome machine part.

Holding his hand up to block the glare of the torch, Simoni asked, "You always talk in circles this way?"

"Sometimes," she said without the least hint of irony in her voice. "Anyway, it's true she doesn't give a damn about *much*. But every now and then, something gets her attention."

*Get to the point already*, he pleaded. But he did so silently, recognizing that some fish had to be reeled in slowly.

Call frowned as she got to work, sparks flying where her torch hit the metal of the machine. "She wasn't always like this, you know. She was human once. *Completely* human."

"I know," Simoni told her. *I read the same books you did, remember? I know how she lived—and how she died.*

"When Ripley signed on with the *Nostromo*, she was happy to be serving as warrant officer of such a large, commercially important ship. It was a big step for her. But she was conflicted, because she was leaving something equally important back on Earth.

"A daughter. Her name was Amanda."

Simoni went numb. He'd had no idea.

"Amanda was ten years old when Ripley left. Ripley promised she would be back for the girl's eleventh birthday. Unfortunately, things didn't work out the way she planned. Her escape vehicle—"

"The *Narcissus*," he bubbled, unable to stop himself.

"—went through the core systems undetected, and was picked up by a deep space salvage team. By the time Ripley was returned to Earth, it was fifty-seven years after she left the *Nostromo*, and her daughter had already passed away."

Simoni shook his head. *This is gold. This is frickin' platinum. A daughter*, for godsakes.

"As you can imagine," said Call, "Ripley's heart broke when she heard the news. Her daughter had lived a lifetime never knowing what happened to her mother— maybe hating her for never coming back. And Ripley never had the chance to know Amanda as an adult. She had missed the good times, the bad times, all of it.

"For a while," said Call, "all Ripley did was dig through records, trying to learn what she could about Amanda— how she lived, who she loved, what she did with her life. What Ripley found was just a tease. Her daughter had married early in life, but divorced before the marriage could produce children. She had lived in a number of places, all of them on Earth. And she had died of a debilitating disease for which a cure was discovered seven years later."

Simoni still didn't understand why Ripley had asked him those questions. But he managed to keep his damned mouth shut, exercising all the patience he could muster.

"There was one other thing," Call continued. "Amanda had worked for years as a journalist."

*Pay dirt*, he thought.

Ripley's daughter, whom she hadn't seen since she left as warrant officer on the *Nostramo*, was a writer just like Simoni. It all made sense now.

Call paused in her work to look at him. "You understand why she might be curious about what you do."

Simoni nodded. "I do now. Thanks."

Call shrugged. "Don't mention it."

But he would. It was his job to mention *everything*.

\* \* \*

When Aidan Shepherd was ten years old, his tomcat Daffy got himself lost in a mining tunnel. Though it was against regulations for children to enter the tunnels, his father—the colony's chief of security—agreed to let young Aidan join the search.

It wasn't the first time a pet had wandered downside. They were almost always discovered safe and sound, if a little strung-out from the experience. But then, even animals seemed to get nervous when they were left in the dark long enough.

Shepherd wasn't sure when he realized his cat wasn't coming home, or what tipped him off. Maybe it was the long, echoing silence of the tunnel, or the increasing pessimism in the expressions of his father's colleagues, or the way the cold started seeping into his bones.

By the time they found the blood, he was certain of it. Something bad had happened. Something *horrible*.

Minutes later, he found out *how* horrible.

Daffy had ripped his belly open on a rusted bolt protruding from the floor of the tunnel. Little by little, his entrails had uncoiled and spilled out, but he hadn't given in to the crippling reality of his plight. He had kept going, dragging his insides behind him for what



looked to be fifty meters, until finally his heart gave out from loss of blood.

Shepherd had loved that cat. His eyes filled with tears and his throat closed painfully, but he couldn't bring himself to touch Daffy. He was too glassy-eyed, too still, and the filthy red thing that had come out of him was too much for Shepherd's child's mind to contemplate.

From that time on, whenever someone was lost— either animal or human—a part of Shepherd feared the worst. Never mind the fact that all the colony's subsequent searches had had happier endings. The little boy within him could still see his cat lying in a puddle of his own dark blood.

So why had Shepherd gone into security work like his father? Why had he placed himself in the position of seeking lost souls in obscure places? Maybe to prove to himself that he could. Or to assure himself that what happened to Daffy was an aberration, unlikely to repeat itself.

Especially in the Domes, where there was so little to fear in the way of injury and even less to fear in the way of violence. In the twelve years Shepherd had served there as safety officer, the worst he had seen was a non-displaced fracture of a leg bone—the result of some inebriated, late-night tree climbing.

And as he guided his all-terrain flivver through a palmetto grove, he had no reason to believe this instance would be an exception—even though Pandor hadn't filed his report on the contents of the cryo tube, or responded to Philipakos's attempts to contact him. More than likely his comm unit had simply malfunctioned, leaving him unaware that anyone was calling.

*Yeah, that's it.* In fact, Pandor had complained about his unit, hadn't he? And hadn't Erica fixed it?

*Of course, that was nearly a year ago.* Erica was one of the few who had left the colony of their own volition, in her case because of an opportunity at an Earthside research lab.

Others came to the Domes intending to spend a year or two, but ended up staying somehow. And staying. And *staying*.

*Like me,* Shepherd thought.

Safety jobs weren't easy to get, especially when one was starting out. Philipakos had had an opening and Shepherd had jumped at it. But he had figured on staying for only eighteen months, then looking for something more challenging.

Except Philipakos and the others had grown on him, and when the time came to leave he couldn't do it. He had become a part of the Domes, like the rest of them.

Up ahead, the entrance to the supply bay loomed through the trees. Like the passages that gave access from dome to dome, it was a six-sided affair; unlike them, it was twice as high as Shepherd was tall, so the botanists could move larger items in and out of the bay.

There was one other difference between this passage and the others: the doors didn't retract at the tripping of a proximity sensor. They had to be unlocked. Otherwise, Rex could have gotten in on his own, and the idea of letting a dog loose in the supply bay wasn't a good one for him or anyone else.

Bringing the flivver to a stop just shy of the doors, Shepherd turned his engine off. Then he went over to a keypad set into the doorframe, punched in the requisite five-digit code, and watched the doors slide apart.

At first, he didn't see anyone in the bay—just the open cryo tube in its metal-alloy cradle. It was only after he went inside that he found Pandor.

He was stretched out on the deck, his head cocked at an awkward angle. It was hard to tell because his face was turned away and covered with one of his arms, but he looked as if he might have broken his neck.

*Crap*, Shepherd thought, rushing to Pandor's side.

He couldn't tell how the botanist had hurt himself. *No sign of a mechanical malfunction*, he thought, his training kicking in. *No sign that anything came loose above him*.

But he could worry about the cause of the problem later. At that moment, he had to help Pandor.

Kneeling beside him, Shepherd reached under the botanist's collar for his carotid artery, to get a reading on his pulse. But as he did so, he felt something bony— something that didn't at all feel like the skin of a man's neck, living or dead.

Pulling Pandor's collar away a bit, the safety officer saw something thin and white and sharp at the end. *What the hell ... ?*

Taking it between thumb and forefinger, he tried to remove it. But it wouldn't budge. In fact, it seemed to adhere to Pandor's skin that much more stubbornly.

And now that he looked at it more closely, it appeared it was part of something bigger. Something Shepherd couldn't see because Pandor's arm was draped over his face.

Knowing he wasn't going to like what he saw, he took the botanist's arm and gently repositioned it. Then he turned Pandor over until he was facing the ceiling.

*My god*, Shepherd thought.

Pandor's face was completely covered with what looked like a big, pale spider. It had a series of skeletal ridges along its back, eight spindly legs that seemed to have locked themselves into place along

the sides of Pandor's head, and a tail that had wrapped itself around Pandor's throat.

Shepherd swallowed. *Hard.*

"Elijah?" he said. "Can you hear me?"

No answer.

Suddenly, the thing did something that made Shepherd jump backward and go skidding across the deck: it *pulsed*. Just like an ugly, bone-encrusted heart.

Shepherd cursed out loud, trying to come to grips with the evidence of his eyes. The thing was *alive*. But how had it gotten into the Domes? And what was it doing to Pandor's face?

Then he remembered—the cryo tube from Gamma. If Pandor had been poking around in it, he might have found something that wasn't supposed to be there.

*This* thing, for instance.

Making his way to the silver tube, Shepherd took a look inside. Most of the cargo was made up of violets, different colors and varieties. But at one end, there was something else—a leathery-looking, blue-black ovoid that had split open at the top to reveal its white, gooey contents.

He wasn't a botanist, but he had been around the Domes long enough to know this was something unusual. And it must have opened recently, or it would have spilled its guts out in stasis.

Shepherd looked back at the thing on Pandor's face. Could it have come out of the ovoid—and done it so abruptly, so explosively, that Pandor wasn't ready for it? Or had it crawled and climbed until it could drop on Pandor from above?

Either way, it seemed to him the ovoid was the source of the problem. And Shepherd had no way of knowing that a second thing wasn't waiting inside it, waiting to spring on someone.

Or, he thought with a wary glance at the ceiling, laying in wait among the chains. Unseen, in the shadows, until someone walked directly below it ...

*No, he insisted, you're not getting spooked by this shit. You don't have the luxury. You need to do your job and help Pandor.*

With that in mind, Shepherd reached for the tube's control pad and pressed the stud that would close the hatch. Then he backed up, step by step, ready for a spider-creature to come skittering out.

Only when the hatch door had closed completely did he breathe easier. A little, anyway. He still had to deal with the thing on Pandor's face.

Fighting back a wave of apprehension, Shepherd approached it, wrapped his hand around its hard, smooth body, and tried to lift it off. But it clung so hard it brought the botanist's head up along with it.

Shepherd let it down slowly. Then he placed his cheek on the deck alongside Pandor and peered at him through the legs of the spider-thing. *He's still got color. The safety officer felt his colleague's wrist. And a pulse.*

So Pandor was still alive. But it was difficult to imagine how, with his mouth and nose closed off.

Clearly, this was a problem Shepherd had neither the skills nor the equipment to address. Whipping out his comm unit, he opened a link to Philipakos.

*"Yes?"* came the response.

*"It's Shepherd. I found Pandor."*

*"Is he all right?"*

What could Shepherd say? *He's fine, if you ignore the bony thing hugging his face.*

"I don't know," he said, and described the situation to Philipakos.  
"I've never seen anything like it."

*"Is he conscious?"* asked the administrator.

It was difficult to tell. "I don't think so."

A pause. *"Don't move him, Shep. We'll be right there."*

"We" meaning he and Angie, and anyone else Philipakos thought might be of assistance. Whoever they were, Shepherd would be glad to see them.

"Hang in there," he told Pandor, his voice echoing eerily in the confines of the supply bay. "We're going to get you out of there, buddy."

If the botanist could hear him, he gave no indication of it.

## 8

*My god*, thought Hendricks.

Somehow, she managed to stop short of saying it out loud. The other colonists already thought of her as the consummate ditz. She didn't want to add any more fuel to their fire.

But it wasn't easy to be quiet now that she could see the thing on Pandor's face for herself.

"They've got to get it off," said Gogolac, standing alongside Hendricks and gazing through the window of the infirmary.

Hendricks was glad that *someone* had said it.

"They will," Shepherd assured them. "Don't worry." But his expression belied the confidence he espoused.

Inside the infirmary, Pandor was stretched out on an examination table, surrounded by Philipakos and Angie. Every so often Pandor's hand twitched, letting his colleagues know he was still alive.

But it was hard to believe. *With that horrible thing on his face, how can he breathe?*

"Why don't they just cut the goddamned thing off?" Cody asked, his impatience evident in his voice.

Normally, he was the most even-tempered of them, the guy who had a smile for everyone. *But not now.*

Shepherd glanced at him. "Be patient, Earl. We're all concerned about Elijah. And we'll know more about how to help him once Angie's finished examining him."

As if on cue, Angie left Pandor's side and emerged from the infirmary. Removing her sanitary gloves, she tossed them in a refuse bin that came up to her waist.

Angie looked tired. As tired as Hendricks had ever seen her.

"Well?" asked Shepherd.

Hendricks looked at him, thinking, *Now who's the impatient one?* But she didn't say that either.

"Pandor's alive," Angie said in her odd, little girl's voice. "but he's in a paralytic coma—induced, apparently, by a toxin that thing injected into him."

"Paralytic ... " Cody repeated. "So how is he breathing?"

Yes, thought Hendricks, *how?* That was what she had wanted to know all along.

Angie frowned. "The thing is doing Pandor's breathing *for* him. Bringing in oxygen and expelling carbon dioxide."

"Shit," said Gogolac, her brow creasing down the middle. "So if you take it off ... "

"Pandor dies," said Angie. "Which is why we've decided to leave it on, at least for the time being."

"But not indefinitely," Gogolac suggested hopefully.

"Unfortunately," said Angie, "it's not just a respiration problem. Even if we find an antidote for the toxin, the thing has an appendage shoved down Pandor's throat— all the way to his lungs, judging from our scans. If we try to yank it out, it could take half his throat with it."



"I don't get it," said Seigo, a razor-thin, balding man whose breath smelled like sour milk. "Why would something affix itself to Pandor's face, put him into a coma, and then keep him alive?"

"Oh my god!" said Hendricks.

Everyone looked at her.

She had tried so hard not to blurt it out, but it came anyway. And now she had to explain. "It just occurred to me," she said as calmly and clinically as she could. "What if it wants to eat him?"

Cody planted his hand against the wall and started to gag. Putting a hand on the botanist's shoulder, Shepherd frowned at Hendricks. "No one's going to get eaten," he said. Then he turned to Angie. "Am I right?"

Angie's lips pressed together for a moment. "No," she said at last. "There's been no indication of a problem in that regard."

*But she can't rule it out.* Hendricks could read that between the lines. *It could be eating him.*

"As for why else the thing might have latched onto him," said Angie, "your guess is as good as mine. This is some kind of alien life-form, however primitive. Its biological imperatives may be different from anything we've ever encountered."

"We've got to help him," said Gogolac. "Somehow."

"What about the rest of us?" asked Seigo. "Are we in danger of the same thing happening to us?"

"I don't think so," said Shepherd. "There was only one ovoid in the tube—I made sure of that."

That seemed to satisfy everyone except Seigo.

"What if another one of those things crawled out before you got there?" he pressed. "What if it's hiding in a corner, waiting for one of us to stumble on it?"

"I searched the bay," Shepherd noted. "There was nothing else in there."

"You can't be sure of that," said Seigo. "The damned thing's not that big. It could be hiding anywhere."

*He's right, Hendricks reflected. Shepherd can't be sure. Just like Angie can't be sure the thing's not eating Pandor.*

She imagined herself in the dimly lit supply bay, looking for a set of pruning shears. She could see herself approaching the tool cabinet, pulling out the drawer where the shears were kept, and seeing something egg-shaped inside it—something leathery-looking that, as she watched, spellbound, split at the top and ejected something at her face. Something small and gooey and insanely strong—

Hendricks shivered. It was too terrible to even think about.

It was then that Angie's father came out of the exam room. A gentle, paunchy man with a mane of gray hair and a beard to match, Philipakos looked stricken.

"Angie's told you Pandor's status?" he asked.

"She did," said Shepherd.

"I have some concerns about there being more of those things around," said Seigo, "Shepherd's precautions to the contrary."

"The question," said Gogolac, who could be relentless when she wanted something, "is what we're going to do for Pandor, here and now."

Philipakos nodded. "I feel the same way. But he's stable, at least. And until we know more about this creature, it would be unwise to do anything that might jeopardize Pandor's survival."

Cody shook his head. "I don't like it."

"None of us does," said Angie. "But we've got to think with our heads, not our hearts."

"What if your tests don't turn up anything useful?" asked Gogolac. "What do we do then?"

Angie started to answer, then seemed to think better of it. It was her father who said, "We'll cross that bridge when we come to it."

No one had a better idea, so it ended there. But with the exception of Seigo, who said he had work to do, none of them left. They stayed and peered through the observation window, alone with their respective thoughts.

Hendricks' was: *At least I kept my mouth shut most of the time.*

\* \* \*

Simoni hadn't been able to get Ripley or Call to tell him where their ship was headed. However, he hadn't tracked down a legend strictly through luck.

He was good at biding his time, and he was even better at keeping his eyes and ears open. And eventually, those qualities stood him in good stead on the *Betty* as well.

Simoni had just come from another one-sided conversation with Krakke and was on his way to his room when he heard voices coming through its open doorway. Stopping just shy of it, he listened more closely.

*There's only one voice*, he decided. *Vriess's*. But there were deep moans of satisfaction alternating with the little man's remarks, and those seemed to be coming from someone else.

At least, Simoni *hoped* they were.

"Makes my blood boil," said Vriess.

"Umm," said a feminine voice. "Mine too."

*Bolero*, Simoni thought. *Definitely Bolero*.

"I'm talking about the *aliens*," said Vriess. "After what happened on the *Auriga*—"

“Yesss,” Bolero hissed. “Keep going ... ”

“—you’d think nobody would be stupid enough to mess with the slimy sonsabitches again. But I guess there’s no shortage of stupidity out there.”

“If you say so,” Bolero responded. “A little to the right, lover. That’s it ... ”

Simoni wondered if they knew the door was open. And he wondered even more what Bolero saw in a paraplegic. But he could ponder those questions later.

“Some good people got snuffed by those monsters,” said Vriess. “Elgyn, for instance. I told you about Elgyn.”

“You did,” Bolero groaned.

“He’s the one who got me interested in *this* ... ”

Bolero gasped.

“And this,” said Vriess.

“God,” she whimpered.

“And they goddamn killed him. Me too, almost. And now the same thing’s going to happen all over again unless we stop it.”

“No,” she said in a high, thin voice. “Don’t stop it, lover. *Please* don’t stop it ... ”

Simoni swallowed. He felt like a peeping Tom—which wasn’t altogether a bad thing. Besides, he had no choice. He had to listen, to pick up whatever tidbits they gave him.

“You like it this way, don’t you?” Vriess asked.

“Oh god,” she said, “I do ... ”

“How about like this?” he asked, his voice thickening.

“Yes,” Bolero breathed “yes, more than anything ... ”

Simoni was so absorbed in their sex play, he didn’t know he was being watched as well—until someone behind him bellowed with indignation, spinning him around.

Without meaning to, he had also taken a step backward. It placed him directly in line with the open doorway, through which he got a clear if undesired picture of Vriess and Bolero.

The pilot was lying on the little man's bed, face down, with one of her naked feet in his lap and the other in his attentive hands. *A foot massage*, Simoni thought, feeling foolish as all hell. *He's giving her a goddamned foot massage.*

"What the hell are you doing?" Vriess demanded.

"I'd like to hear that myself," said Bolero, dragging a sweaty lock of hair from her forehead.

But that wasn't the worst of it. Because it seemed Johner was the one who had yelled at Simoni, and he was striding down the corridor to confront him. Or *worse*.

Simoni turned back to Vriess and Bolero and said, "Sorry." Then, before Johner could reach him, the reporter made a beeline for the room Ripley shared with Call and Bolero.

The door was closed, of course. But it would slide aside at his approach, offering him shelter.

Unless Ripley or Call was inside and had activated the lock. Then he would be stuck out in the corridor with Johner—and he really didn't want to think about that.

Unfortunately for Simoni, the door didn't budge when he got near. As Johner approached him, a savage smile on his face, the reporter pounded on the metal door with the flat of his hand. *Please*, he thought, *let Ripley be inside*.

Johner put a hand on Simoni's shoulder and spun him around. "Where you going, pervert?"

"I didn't mean to—" Simoni began.

Before he could finish, he heard the door slide open behind him. *Thank god*, he thought.

But when he turned to explain the situation, he realized it wasn't Ripley who had opened the door. It was Call.

"What's going on?" she asked.

"Why, nothing," said Johner, putting his arm around Simoni's shoulders. "Me and the sneak here, we're just having a little heart to heart."

Call frowned. "Ripley will be pissed if you kill him. Even by accident."

"How about if I just pull his arms off?"

"Go back to your cage," Call told him.

Cursing to himself, Johner went back where he came from. Simoni turned to his savior. "Thanks."

"The next time I catch you eavesdropping," said Call, "I'll pull your arms off myself. Understand?"

The reporter nodded. "Absolutely." But he was thinking, *If you told me what you were up to, I wouldn't have to eavesdrop—would I?*

Pandor opened his eyes and cursed. But instead of a sound coming from his mouth, a bubble squirted out.

*God, he thought, where am I?*

He was immersed in water, somehow—water that was warm and red like blood, if a little thinner. And his lungs were screaming for air. If he didn't get some soon, he would drown.

He didn't know how he had wound up there. He just knew he had to find the surface. But which way was *up*?

Spinning around frantically, Pandor caught sight of a patch of light. It was vague, diffuse, but it seemed to him it might be the sun. And he had to try *something*, dammit. He couldn't just hang there until his goddamned air ran out.

Swimming as hard as he could, he speared through the water in the direction of the light. But he didn't seem to be making any progress. The light just shimmered in front of him, teasing him, leading him on.

Redoubling his efforts, he became less streamlined, less efficient. And his efforts depleted his oxygen even faster. His arms and legs got weak, rubbery, and he felt the urge to pull something down his throat.

But he didn't want to die. And more than that, he didn't want to die with his throat full of water. So he hung on, and kicked, and stroked for the light while darkness closed in around the edges of his vision.

Suddenly, without warning, he broke the surface. Unable to help himself any longer, he sucked in as hard as he could, making a keening sound like a soul lost in the depths of hell ...

And found himself sitting upright in a bed, cold sweat bathing his face, white light all around him. Squinting, he discerned shapes in the light. Or maybe just one shape, it was hard to tell.

"Pandor?" someone said.

The voice was feminine, girlish in pitch. And he recognized it. "Angie?" he returned.

Then his eyes began to adjust to the light and he saw he was in the infirmary, with someone in a white lab coat standing beside him. It was Angie, all right. And she looked deeply concerned.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

*Am I okay ... ?* Pandor echoed stupidly, taking stock of himself. *Not completely.* He felt bruised, beaten. His muscles were trembling. And his throat hurt like a thousand flaming hells.

He was dry too. So dry that it felt as if all the water had been sucked out of him.

"Are you all right, Elijah?" Angie pressed, a little more concern in her voice this time.

Pandor tried to tell her but his throat wouldn't cooperate. It was too parched, too swollen for him to push any words out.

Finally, with a considerable effort, he managed to whisper a single urgent word: "Water."

"Get him some water," said Angie, looking back at someone.

A moment later, she raised a yellow plastic cup to his lips. As she tipped it, Pandor felt a cool, wet trickle in his mouth, and gulped it down greedily. But it wasn't enough—not nearly.

Grabbing the cup, he sucked down the rest of its contents—or rather, the portion that didn't stream down his face and wet his chest. He could feel the moisture spreading through his tissues like an elixir. It opened his throat enough for him to speak more easily.

Trying to catch his breath as he thrust the cup back at Angie, Pandor croaked, "More."

She gave him more and he guzzled that down as well. And a third cupful, at which point he realized it was Shepherd supplying the water. And a fourth, after which he stopped counting.

At last, he lay back into his pillow and asked, in a more lubricated voice, "What happened to me?"

Angie frowned. "I was about to ask you the same thing. Shepherd found you laid out in the supply bay with some kind of creature attached to your face."

Pandor felt his cheek. It was irritated, tender to the touch. *A creature? On my face?* But outside of Rex, there were no creatures in the Domes. "Where did it come from?"

"You don't remember?" asked Shepherd.

Pandor gave him a look. *If I knew, would I have asked?*



"We think it arrived in the cryo shipment," Angie told him. "There was a big, leathery egg tucked into one end of the tube. Its top was split open and its insides were coated with a sticky, white goo—the same kind we found on the creature."

"You have it?" he asked. "The creature, I mean?"

"It's dead," said Angie, "but yes, we have it."

"I want to see it," he told her.

"You will," she assured him.

"How do you feel?" asked Shepherd.

"Awful," said Pandor. "My joints especially. Like I've fallen down a flight of steps and hit some of them twice."

"Probably all you need is rest," said Angie. She glanced at Shepherd. "We'll let him sleep."

But Pandor didn't feel the least bit sleepy. He said so. "What I really need is—"

"More water," said Shepherd, anticipating.

"No," said Pandor, "food. All of a sudden, I've got a pit in my stomach the size of a nickel excavation."

"In that case," said Shepherd, "you're in luck. Dinner's in forty five minutes."

*Forty five ... ?* Pandor shook his head. "I can't wait that long."

Shepherd smiled sympathetically. "Don't worry. I'll dig something up for you." He glanced at Angie. "That is, if it's all right with your physician."

Angie mulled it over for a moment, then shrugged her narrow shoulders. "I don't see why not. Just go slow, all right? You haven't had anything in your stomach for a long time."

Out of curiosity, Pandor asked, "How long *exactly*?"

Angie frowned. "Two days."

Pandor swallowed. Two *days*? "Are you kidding?"

She shook her head from side to side. "To be honest," she said, a pang evident in her voice, "we weren't completely sure you were going to make it."

"But he did," Shepherd interjected. "And that's the important thing. Now get some rest," he told Pandor, "and I'll see what I can dig up in the way of something edible."

"All right," said Pandor.

And he lay back in his bed. But he found he wasn't comfortable closing his eyes—because as much as his senses told him otherwise, he still had the feeling he was drowning.

\* \* \*

In Ripley's recurring nightmare, she was only half-conscious, but she could feel herself locked in an intricate lattice of hot, hard flesh, a seething mass in which every seemingly random movement was balanced by some other.

*Perfect harmony*, she thought. If she allowed herself to drift a little deeper, she would be hopelessly and irretrievably lost.

As it was, a carefully buried part of her responded to the ebb and flow of the lattice. It longed to writhe as the bodies around her were writhing, with languid ease and an almost sexual abandon.

The scent in her nostrils was sharp, fragrant. So compelling she could barely resist it.

But she didn't belong there. She was *human*, dammit.

Forcing her eyes open, Ripley looked around. She was immersed in a wall-to-wall hive full of slumbering aliens— the one to which she had woken years earlier, after she had been wrenched from the company of Call and the others and dragged down to the Hades of Auriga's waste chamber.

The bodies around her slid restlessly, moving independently but as one—a nest of cold-blooded serpents taking pleasure in the sinuous proximity of their kind. They were alien, unknowable ...

And yet unspeakably familiar.

A queen towered over the nest, imperious, angular, and alert—and burdened by a belly so immense and bloated it seemed independent of her. It was hard to believe a creature like the queen had ever been a passenger in Ripley's body. In fact, that was the reason Ripley had been created from a smear of blood—to give birth to the queen lodged in the original Ripley before she died.

Suddenly the queen arched her spine with a to-that-point unknown kind of pain. A shriek tore from her mouth and echoed in the chamber, signaling that her long-awaited birth pangs were upon her.

The nest shuddered with her. She was about to produce the next generation of killing machine, the next wave of silent, slaving death, and there was a subtle celebration of the prospect in the aliens' rhythms.

*It's a dream*, Ripley reminded herself, shrinking from the queen's obscenely swollen belly and the ripples visible under its flesh. *Just a dream. You've been through this before.*

The queen in the waste chamber had given birth to a monstrosity—an alien male corrupted with Ripley's human DNA, his cavernous eye sockets and gaping maw giving him the aspect of a living death's head. Confused by the conflicting signals in his brain—*Love? Protect? Kill?*—he had basked in the presence of the female who gave him life, then lashed out with his claw and cut her open.

But *this* newborn would be different. Ripley knew that with a certainty that transcended any reasonable method of gathering and processing information.

As the queen's progeny punctured her sac and began her ferocious birth-struggle, Ripley tried desperately to squirm away from it. But she couldn't. It was her destiny to remain there, to bear witness to this awful and momentous event.

After all, she was the queen's mother, in a way. Whatever came out of the alien was Ripley's responsibility as well.

The Queen shrieked, knowing something was wrong. But she couldn't do anything about it. She was as spellbound as Ripley, as transfixed by the birth taking place before her.

Little by little, the newborn wrestled itself out of the alien's belly, its neck muscles standing out like steel cords, its naked pallor covered only with a veneer of viscous, yellow-white glop. Only when it had pulled its foot out and was entirely free did it look around at the world it had entered, its head making little jerking movements as it took it all in.

But this thing that had emerged into the darkness wasn't alien at all. It was infinitely worse, infinitely colder and crueler than any alien ever spawned.

It was a *man*.

And not just any man. It was the one called *Wren*, who had schemed to grow a Ripley clone from preserved cells so he could obtain the alien gestating inside her—the bastard who had ignored the pain and infirmity of helpless, twisted beings in single-minded pursuit of his unholy objective.

Because before Wren created his perfect Ripley, he spawned a generation of failed attempts, each one wracked by its mixed alien-and-human heritage in a different way. All but one of these grotesqueries died in burbling agony.

The unlucky one lived—until Ripley stumbled on her and incinerated her. She could still see the flames devouring the poor,

hideous thing, enabling her to escape the misery of her existence.

But none of that had mattered to Wren. All he cared about was the recognition he would get, the accolades that would be due him as the man who resurrected the aliens.

If Ripley had a father, it was Wren. And she hated him as she had never hated anyone else.

Now she glared at the all-too-human monster hunkering on the queen's punctured belly. He grinned as he had when she first met him, confident in his superiority.

Ripley's anger rose into her throat and stuck there, leaving her to choke on it. She could tolerate a life-form driven by instinct to kill, but Wren had *chosen* to inflict pain and death— and in Ripley's eyes there was no excuse for that.

In her dream-logic, she decided she couldn't let him live to bring pain to others. She had to end his existence then and there, finally and irrevocably.

Slowly, so Wren wouldn't notice, she slipped free from the press of alien bodies. Then she crawled across them as lightly as she could, careful not to disturb any of them.

Wren, meanwhile, turned to the queen and bestowed a big smile on her—a smile of gratitude, apparently, for giving him life. Then, like the newborn on the *Auriga*, he slashed her throat open with a swipe of his claw, sending her blood flying across the room in gouts of metal-eating acid.

Ripley felt it eat into her skin, gouging it to the bone. But she ignored the pain, knowing her flesh would grow back. It was her opportunity that might be lost forever.

While Wren was still gloating over his kill, she continued to negotiate the shrugging sea of bodies. Little by little, she bridged the

gap separating her from her objective, until finally she came within striking distance.

Gathering herself, she sprang—but before she could sink her nails into Wren’s neck, he whirled and snatched her by the throat. Then he grinned in her face—insanely, maniacally.

“How’s our Number Eight today?” he asked her, as civilly as if they were having tea.

Ripley clawed at his hand but couldn’t budge it. He was too strong, too determined. Gradually he cut off her air, inviting the darkness to close in on her.

*No, she thought. Kill you. Kill you ...*

Wren ran his hand across the protruding ribs of his cavernous torso, obviously pleased with what he found there, and said, “You should be very proud.”

Ripley kicked at him, tattooing his chest with her fury. But it didn’t help. Wren just stood there choking the life out of her, until the darkness closed down altogether.

But even then, she struggled. And as she did so, she heard a voice. *Not Wren’s, she realized. Someone else’s ...*

*“Ripley?”* it said.

She followed it through the darkness, hunting it, drawn by it ... and opened her eyes to the pale spill of starlight through the unshielded observation port by her bed.

*Why am I awake?* she wondered.

*“Ripley?”* came a voice over the intercom.

Vriess, she thought. He had pulled helm duty that night.

Instantly, she came alert. She could see everything, hear everything, smell everything. And *feel* everything—even the soft, almost imperceptible caress of ventilation on her naked flesh.

“What is it?” she asked.

*"They're here,"* said Vriess.

Ripley knew exactly what he meant by *they*. "How long do we have?"

*"Ten minutes. Maybe a little less."*

*Ten minutes.* After anticipating this moment for years. "Tell the others," she told him.

*"Right away,"* said Vriess, and cut the link.

Ripley swung her legs out of bed, got to her feet, and walked across the room. En route, she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror that had belonged to Elgyn, the *Betty's* previous captain.

By human standards, she was impressive—tall, hard-muscled, agile—what Wren had called "an unparalleled blend of strength and coordination." She could do things other humans couldn't, endure punishment that would kill anyone else.

When it came to alien standards—because she could apply those just as easily—she was equally impressive. But not because of her physical attributes—the aliens didn't have sight organs, after all. To them, she was impressive because she could *think*.

They liked that about her. Respected her for it.

It was what had enabled her to survive the onslaught of the aliens on the *Auriga*, and that of the newborn in particular. And it was what would enable her to survive the present threat.

Continuing to the other side of the room, she removed her clothes from a hook and slipped them on. Then she picked up her hand burner and tucked it into her belt.

*Ready,* she thought.

But then, she had been born ready. *Literally.*

## 9

Simoni woke to find Rama sitting up in bed, saying something about Ripley. At least he *thought* it was about Ripley. The cobwebs in his head were so thick it was difficult to say.

*Talking in his sleep*, Simoni thought. *Again*. Rama had done it almost every night.

Except he wasn't slurring his words this time. He was speaking quickly and precisely. And as the reporter listened, he realized someone was *answering*.

It was Vriess. "You ask me," said the little man, "*it's about time. Let's get it over with.*"

"My sentiments exactly," said Rama, pulling aside his covers. "I'll see you in a moment."

"What's going on?" Simoni asked.

"We've got company," said Rama, reaching for the pants hanging from a nearby hook and pulling them on with some urgency. "Stay here. I'll let you know when it's safe to come out."

*He should know me better than that*, Simoni thought. *You tell me to stay somewhere, I'm leaving first chance I get.*



He waited until Rama opened the door and left the room. Then he got out of bed, poked his head into the corridor, and saw which way the engineer was headed.

*Toward the cockpit, apparently.* Simoni gathered his clothes, pulled them on, and followed.

When he opened the door to the cockpit, three people turned to look at him. None of them seemed especially pleased to see him.

"What the hell are *you* doing here?" asked Vriess.

"You should have stayed in the room," said Rama, glancing up from an instrument bank aft of the pilot's seat.

Simoni took it upon himself to peer over Bolero's shoulder. He could see a red blip moving from upper right to lower left on the screen of her central monitor.

"What's that?" he asked. "A ship?"

"That's right," said Bolero, though her attention was clearly focused on her monitors.

"Friendly?" he wondered.

"Not likely," she told him matter-of-factly.

He felt a chill crawl his spine. "What do they want from us?"

Bolero swiveled in her chair to face a different section of her instrument panel. "That's the question, isn't it?"

*Not very helpful,* Simoni thought. *But then, he didn't think "helpful" was what she was going for.*

"Anyway," he said, "it's okay if they're not friendly, right? We have defenses?"

"Some," Bolero confirmed. "Of course, the best defense would be to hightail it out of here."

"So we're going to run?" Simoni asked. It was only after he drew a disapproving look from Vriess that he realized how disparaging it sounded. "I mean, not that there's anything wrong with it."

Bolero didn't respond. She just kept scrutinizing her monitors, her dark eyes flickering from one to the other.

But she wasn't running. That much was clear, even to Simoni. "What the hell's going on?" he asked.

Rama looked up at him, his expression one of annoyance. "Do me a favor," he said, "and shut up, will you? We're a little busy, in case you hadn't noticed."

"Sorry," said Simoni.

But he wasn't sorry. Whatever was going on had something to do with all the secrecy lately—that was pretty obvious. And he was determined to know what it was.

\* \* \*

All the warning Call got, as she inspected a worn power coupling in the cargo bay, was a jolt that nearly knocked her off her feet. Then the bay doors snapped open like a pair of giant jaws—which was insane, because it was supposed to be a vacuum out there beyond them—and a squadron of black-masked figures swarmed through the gap.

"Shit," she said beneath her breath.

There was no time for her to find a shock rifle, so she grabbed the nearest thing at hand—a big, carbon-covered wrench. As the intruders approached her, she swung the thing in a wild arc, attempting to hold them all at bay.

But they were too quick for her. Before she could swing the wrench back in the other direction, one of her adversaries closed with her and grabbed her arm. The next thing she knew, the wrench was clattering on the deck and the bastard had her elbow jammed up hard behind her back.

"Let me go!" Call growled.

Her captor didn't answer. He just held her there as his companions moved past her. Opening the door that led to the ship's central corridor, they disappeared through it.

"You bastard," she said, her voice thick with frustration. "You won't get away with this."

Still no answer—not a verbal one, at least. But suddenly, the business end of a pistol was pressed against her skull.

The message was clear: *Don't move a muscle*. So Call stayed where she was, silent and quiescent, and waited for events to play themselves out.

\* \* \*

From her hiding place under the tight metal grid that served as a floor in the *Betty's* engineering alcove, Ripley could see the intruders walk over her in their black, rubber-soled boots.

*Two of them, she noted. Armed with shock rifles. Military trained, judging by the way they're holding their weapons.*

If she made even the slightest sound, the intruders would realize where she was and fry her, and confined as she was it would be impossible for her to escape. So she didn't make any sounds.

She just waited until they were well past, lifted the section of grid concealing her, and set it on a neighboring section. Then she crept out of her concealment the way one of her alien forbears would have done it—silently and efficiently.

And with a fire in her blood.

It wasn't the scent of warm, sweet meat that that drove her forward, or the need to provide host bodies for the offspring of her queen, or the instinctive joy of killing. But she felt propelled all the same.

There were invaders in her territory, violating the sanctity of her chosen environment with their impurity and their insolence. *Compromising my nest with their presence.* And for all the humanity in her genes, she couldn't tolerate that.

The intruders had stopped in front of the engineering panel, their objective either to shut down the *Betty's* propulsion system or start a feedback loop that would blow the ship apart. Those were the only two possibilities that made sense.

But Ripley wasn't about to let either of them take place. With soft, patient steps, she closed the gap between her and the intruders, who gave no indication that they were aware of her presence.

After all, they had seen the door close behind them, so they had to be alone in the enclosure. It was that confidence that allowed them to focus on the engineering panel to the exclusion of almost everything else.

*Their first mistake,* she thought.

Ripley waited until she was within a few scant meters of the intruders. Then she said, in a voice untainted by the overwhelming hostility she felt, "You're on my ship."

Instantly they whirled, their rifles at the ready. But by the time they fired, filling the corridor with crackling bursts of electrical energy, Ripley was nowhere to be seen.

The invaders looked at each other. Clearly, they were puzzled by her disappearance. But then, she knew all the hiding places on the *Betty*—even the ones in plain sight.

It would have been easy for her to give the bastards a taste of their own electrical medicine and watch their half-burned bodies twitch to death. But Ripley hadn't hunted in a long time. She had no desire to do this the *easy* way.

Snaking suddenly across the deck behind them, she grabbed one of the invaders by his ankle—and yanked. As he toppled, crying out in surprise, she swarmed over him and snapped his head back with a blow to the face. Then she rolled to the side to avoid a burner blast from his comrade.

With what must have seemed like deceptive speed, Ripley launched herself at her remaining adversary. To his credit, he got off another energy discharge—though not a good one—before she slammed his skull into the surface behind him.

As he hit the deck, Ripley dropped into a crouch, ready for anyone who might have entered unbeknownst to her in the last few seconds. But there was no one there. She relaxed.

Then, with a last glance at the intruders, Ripley headed aft.

\* \* \*

It wasn't easy for Call to resist looking up, but somehow she managed. Long enough, she imagined, for Krakke to raise his eyes over the level of the second-level catwalk railing and draw a bead on Call's captor.

*Any second now*, she told herself.

Unfortunately, burners weren't accurate enough to operate effectively at any real distance. From Krakke's position, it was just as likely that he would burn Call as the intruder.

Which was why Krakke had chosen to arm himself with a different sort of weapon—one of his own making, which fired non-explosive, snub-nosed plastic bullets. If he hit his target, the impact would be more than enough to knock someone senseless; if he missed, the projectile would shatter against a metal surface, leaving the hull wall intact.

Call didn't know where Krakke had picked up his knack for weapon design, but she was thankful he had. *Now if he would only fire the damned thing ...*

But as the seconds passed, nothing happened. Finally, Call felt she couldn't wait any longer. Turning her head, she glanced in Krakke's direction—and got her arm wrenched up higher for her trouble.

"Don't move," said a surprisingly youthful-sounding voice behind her—the first she had heard from the intruder.

"I won't," she promised.

Her indiscretion had already told her what she needed to know. Krakke's line of sight to his target was blocked by a web of hanging chains. The only way he could take out the intruder was if that angle changed—and Krakke, who was limited to the confines of the tiny catwalk, couldn't substantially change it.

*So it's up to me.*

Androids were more durable than human beings in many ways, but they were just as vulnerable to electrical shocks. A bolt from a burner, for instance, could scramble Call's circuits as easily as it could the connections in a human nervous system—even if it was pointed at her head and not at the main processing unit where her consciousness resided.

But she couldn't just stand there. It wasn't only her survival that was at stake. It was the fate of her friends as well.

*And our mission.* That was more important than anything.

Suddenly, she drove her elbow backward into her captor's ribs. Though her model wasn't as strong as the previous generation of androids, she was more than strong enough to double the bastard over and send him stumbling backward.

Whirling, Call saw the intruder recover enough to take aim at her. Though he clearly hadn't wished to harm her, he seemed willing

enough to do it now that she was jeopardizing his mission.

*Krakke!* she pleaded, afraid that it would be the last conscious thought she enjoyed.

But before the invader could fire, something knocked him off his feet. Seeing his weapon hit the deck, Call dove for it and rolled to face her adversary.

But there was no reason for haste, it seemed. The invader lay there as still as a corpse. Looking up at Krakke, Call mouthed the word Nice. Then she stuck the intruder's weapon in her belt, hid herself behind some cargo containers, and waited.

\* \* \*

Johner had spent the last several minutes biding his time in the quarters he shared with Vriess, sitting on the bottom bunk where Vriess hated him to sit, an unlit cigar clamped between his teeth and a fully charged shock rifle cradled in his arms.

He could hear the intruders nosing through the other quarters down the hall, looking for their occupants. But of course, the dickwads weren't going to find any.

And if all went well, they wouldn't find Johner either.

Abruptly, he heard someone curse—and smiled at the sound. *Music to my ears*, he thought, getting to his feet.

Then he walked out of his room, the door accomodating him by sliding aside, and saw the black-garbed figures retreating in the direction of the cargo bay. They were too busy to pay much attention to him, but that would change soon enough.

Moving at a leisurely pace, Johner followed the pack down the corridor and watched them vanish through the opening at the end of it, the door closing in their wake. Without hesitation, he punched the stud in the wall that would open the door again.

As it slid aside, it revealed a bunch of the intruders— one more than Johner had followed there. The guy was gesturing for the others to follow him as he led them to a stack of containers.

Johner smiled to himself, shifted his cigar to the other side of his mouth, and then fired into the midst of the intruders. Impaled on a bolt of blue-white energy, the rearmost sonuvabitch jerked and collapsed.

It was then that the others noticed him standing there. Two of them dropped to their knees and began firing their burners, filling the doorway with a storm of blue energy.

By that time, Johner had withdrawn and laid his back against the intervening bulkhead. *No sense mussing my hair*, he thought, as he waited for the other shoe to drop.

Then he heard someone cry out—maybe two or three someones, in fact—and the bolts slicing through the doorway disappeared. He stuck his head into the room and reconnoitered.

As he had expected, the cargo bay was strobing with a crossfire of burner bolts. Call was on one side, shooting from behind a stack of containers. The intruders—the four who were still standing, at least—were on the other side, using what cover they could find.

*Lousy odds*, Johner thought with a chuckle. *Though not half as lousy as they seem.*

Taking advantage of the intruders' preoccupation with Call, he pumped a few bolts at them. Instantly two of them whirled and returned fire, forcing him to swing back out of harm's way again.

But a moment later he was back, lighting up the cargo bay with his blasts. And because of that, Call got the chance to fritz an intruder with a blast of her own.

*Three to one now*, Johner told himself.



But not really. Because as he laid down another barrage, he saw one of the intruders turn and fire at his own comrade. A moment later, the bastard spasmed and collapsed.

*Treachery*, thought Johner. *You gotta love it.*

The intruder across the bay seemed to disagree. Forgetting about Call for a moment, he fired at the traitor— which left him ridiculously vulnerable. Johner wasn't sure whose burst took the slimeball down—his or Call's—but hell, they could argue about it later.

Lowering his rifle and walking into the room, he surveyed the carnage. Only one intruder was still standing. And as Johner looked on, the guy pulled off his headgear, revealing himself as Krakke.

"That's a good look for you," Johner told him.

As usual, Krakke withheld comment.

But Call, who was emerging from her hiding place, said, "We're not done here, Johner."

As if to underscore the concept, Ripley came through from the open doorway. She looked flushed, but in a good way.

"How was the hunting?" Johner asked her. "Rip anybody's head off?"

Ignoring him, Ripley said, "We're secure. Let's go."

And with that, she led the way through the open bay doors into the dimly lit cavity beyond.

\* \* \*

Rama pushed the point of his hypodermic through the fabric of the intruder's sleeve, injected a quick-acting sleeping concoction into the muscle below, and withdrew the needle. Then, placing it in a plexine bag dangling from his belt, he got up and advanced to the next unconscious figure.

Ripley had assured him that whomever she encountered in the engine room would remain unconscious for a long time. However, Rama wasn't a risk-taker by nature. He didn't like leaving loose ends lying about.

Which was why he had signed on with Ripley's crew in the first place. It nettled him to know there were uncertainties of which he had never been aware, and he itched to eliminate them.

*Anal, he thought, I know.*

But it was Rama's attention to detail that made him such an extraordinary engineer, even if he did say so himself. And it was that same meticulousness that had convinced Ripley to put him on her team.

*So call me anal. Who gives a shit.*

Ripley had a bit of the obsessive about her too. Otherwise, she couldn't have set such a brilliant trap and turned the tables on the intruders. Had they known her better, they would never have believed they could pry open the Betty's bay doors without her captain wanting them to.

Kneeling beside his next "patient," Rama slipped another needle free from his belt, depressed the plunger just hard enough to expel a tiny drop of liquid from the aperture, then inserted it through the intruder's shirt and into his flesh. He shuddered a little and murmured something.

It sounded like "Warn you."

Rama smiled to himself. Apparently, Ripley hadn't been as thorough as she thought. It was a good thing he had backed her up.

He couldn't go with Ripley on her foray into the intruders' vessel; that was the province of people like Johner and Krakke, to whom acts of violence came naturally. However, he would be right behind them to clean up whatever messes they left behind.

Like the one waiting for Rama in the cargo bay. Whistling a selection from Beethoven, he left the engine room and headed down the corridor to his next self-imposed assignment.

\* \* \*

Ripley knew there was something wrong as soon as she reached the far end of the enemy's ship's airlock and set foot on the metal deck beyond.

It was too quiet in the stark, unmarked enclosure in which she found herself. *Too full of echoes.*

"What?" whispered Call, who knew Ripley as well as anybody.

Ripley frowned. "There's no one here. No one alive, anyway."

Johner made a face. "You sure about that?"

"Yes," said Ripley.

Advancing to the cockpit door, which was just a few long strides away, she flung it open. Then she saw why the place was so ghostly still. The two figures in the cockpit were masked and clad all in black like their cohorts. But unlike the others they were lifeless, slumped awkwardly in their chairs.

"What the hell is going on?" Johner demanded, a rising note of anger in his voice.

Ripley moved into the cockpit and pulled the mask off one of the men. He had freckles, and red hair cut into a crewcut. Unless she missed her guess, he hadn't yet turned twenty-two.

She felt his carotid artery and said, "No pulse. But no bleeding either." She turned to the others. "My guess is they've been poisoned."

"Why?" asked Call. Then she answered her own question. "If things didn't go according to plan, they didn't want to leave us anyone we could question."

“What about those pricks back on the *Betty*?” asked Johner.

Ripley shook her head. “They’ll be dead too.” Then she followed her line of reasoning to its dark and inescapable conclusion. “We’ve got to get out of here.”

Suddenly the dead men began to sink into their seats, the redhead’s skin turning dark and baggy-looking. “What the hell—?” said Johner, his head poked into the cockpit.

Ripley didn’t know how much time they had. Shoving Johner backward, she barked, “Now!”

Johner didn’t have to be told a third time. Neither did Call or Krakke. As the four of them bolted back through the ship for the airlock, Ripley cast a glance back at the dead men, still visible through the open door of the cockpit.

Men willing to die for something—she respected that. She had done it herself centuries earlier.

As she entered the airlock, she wondered how long they had before the intruders’ ship blew itself up. *A minute? Two?* If the enemy was willing to sacrifice human lives to preserve his secrets, he would surely be willing to sacrifice a vessel.

And if Ripley’s ship was still attached to her when she blew, the *Betty* would be destroyed as well.

“Call,” she said, once they were through the lock and into the cargo bay, “get those doors closed.” She stopped at the intercom grate on the bulkhead and punched the stud that would activate it. “Bolero, I need you to get us out of here as soon as the doors are shut.”

“*We’re still attached to the hostile,*” the pilot reported.

“Then *do* something about it!” Ripley snapped.

Meanwhile, the bay doors had begun closing the gap between them. They would be airtight in a matter of seconds.

“Brace yourselves!” Ripley called out, knowing that whatever Bolero did would be violent.

“I’m braced!” Johner shot back, his free hand wrapped around a mess of hanging chains. “What the hell are we waiting for?”

He was right. The doors were clamped shut.

Ripley punched the intercom button again. “*Bolero!*”

“*Keep your shirt on!*” came the impassioned response.

Abruptly the *Betty* jerked hard to starboard, slamming Ripley to the deck. She slid helplessly across it for a moment, then latched onto Johner’s extended hand.

“*That’s just an appetizer!*” Bolero announced over the intercom link.

As good as her word, she whipped the ship to port and then to starboard again, sending those in the cargo bay swinging like puppets on thick metal strings. But it felt to Ripley, who had grabbed some chains as well, as if they were still dragging the assault vessel.

*Come on!* she thought, knowing any moment might be their last.

Not that Ripley was so goddamned desperate to go on living. But with all they had done and seen in the last couple of years, they were too important to die.

“Frickin’ Bolero!” Johner growled.

As if on cue, the ship bucked even more savagely than before, subjecting Ripley and her chain-clutching comrades to a moment of weightlessness. Then the artificial gravity seemed to reassert itself and Ripley felt her arm half-wrenched out of its socket.

But she hung on. And her instincts told her that they had removed the assault vessel from their hindquarters.

Just in time, too. Because a moment later, she felt a wicked vibration run through the cargo bay—the shockwave from the

enemy's act of self-annihilation.

"Badda-boom," said Johner.

Ripley relaxed her grip on the chains and looked at her comrades. They all seemed reasonably intact.

"Somebody get hold of Rama," she told them, "and tell him not to bother. His patients won't be waking anytime soon."

She was disappointed. If she had kept the intruders alive, she might have found out more about their organization and their orders. As it was, she and her people had preserved nothing but themselves.

*It could have gone worse, Ripley supposed. But it also could have gone a lot better.*

# 10

Simoni was lying on his bed, considering what to include in his latest journal entry, when he realized he wasn't alone.

Swinging his feet around, he sat up—and saw Ripley standing there just inside the doorway, staring at him.

"When did you come in?" he asked.

"Some time ago," she told him.

It gave Simoni the creeps that she had been standing there without his knowing it. However, he was too interested in the reason for her visit to worry a lot about anything else.

"To what do I owe the honor?" he asked.

"You've been wondering where we're going," she said, "and why that ship attacked us. And if there's a connection between the two."

"It's crossed my mind," he admitted.

"Maybe it's time people knew what we know. Someone like you can tell them."

"If that's what you want," he said, feeling like a starving man at a banquet table, "I'd be happy to oblige."

Ripley frowned at him for a moment. Finally, she said, "You know what happened on the *Nostromo*."

*The Nostromo?* he thought, surprised that she would bring that up. *That was three hundred years ago.*

"It was in the banned histories," she noted.

"Yes," he said, "I remember. You landed on the planet Acheron in response to what you thought was a distress call. A party led by Kane, the executive officer, went to find the source of the call and came across a nest full of big, leathery eggs, the likes of which no one had ever seen before.

"Kane descended among the eggs and was attacked by a creature hiding in one of them—a small, grabby thing. He went into a coma with the thing still stuck to his face. When he woke, the creature was dead and Kane seemed right as Rigel. Trouble was he had an alien embryo growing inside him."

"Which eventually burst out of his chest," Ripley continued, "splintering his ribcage and killing him. We couldn't go back into stasis with a creature running around the ship, so we made plans to track it down. But all the while it was growing, maturing. Soon it was an adult, capable of reducing a man to bloody bone fragments and tatters of flesh."

"Little by little, it took the lives of the *Nostromo's* crew. First Brett, then Captain Dallas, then Parker and Lambert. It would have killed me too, but I got lucky."

Simoni held up his hand. "Hang on. The histories say the alien met its match in you."

Ripley let out a laugh. "I was *lucky*. Even now, I'm no match for a full-grown alien. No one is."

"But you're a survivor," he said. "That's documented."

She shrugged. "I died, didn't I?"

He was about to point out that her death had been only a temporary condition, but he didn't want to get too far off track.



“Right,” he said. “Go on.”

“We were pretty unlucky,” said Ripley, “that the *Nostromo* was the one to receive that distress signal. And even more unlucky that Kane went into that nest and got himself impregnated—and that the alien wound up inside our ship, running loose.

“At least, that’s what I thought when my crewmates started dying around me. But I found out otherwise. In fact, it was all part of a carefully orchestrated plan.

“The *Nostromo* was picked in advance to be the vessel that would set down on Acheron—because someone knew there was a nest of alien life-forms there. And when we sent a team to investigate, in accordance with our orders, it was no accident that one of us got an alien planted inside him.”

Simoni thought he saw where she was going with this. “Morse said Weyland-Yutani wanted the aliens for their bio-engineering division.”

“Morse was right,” Ripley said. “But he didn’t know all of it. For starters, he didn’t know about Ash.”

Simoni shook his head. “Ash?”

Ripley looked as if she had eaten something rancid. “An android, first generation. Of course, Captain Dallas didn’t know that when Ash was assigned to him. The captain thought Ash was just another company science officer.

“A guy named Umbulu had worked the previous five hauls on the *Nostromo*, and Dallas liked the work he had done. So Umbulu was all set to work a sixth haul. But two days before the ship’s scheduled departure from Thedus, Umbulu vanished. Left a message for the captain saying something had come up.

“That left the door open for Ash, Weyland-Yutani’s chosen replacement. But he wasn’t there to make scientific judgments and

observations. He was there to make certain we brought the company an alien—what he called an encephalopod.”

*Interesting*, thought Simoni. “What did he do?”

Ripley’s jaw muscles rippled. “After Dallas and Lambert brought Kane back to the ship, I refused to open the hatch for them. I was concerned about the organism compromising our environment. Ash ignored my status as ranking officer on board, not to mention the science division’s rules about quarantine, and let the landing party in.

“At first I thought he had acted rashly because he was eager to examine an unknown life-form. Then he did and said things that told me it was more than that. For instance, Ash was studying Kane’s medical scans on a regular basis—he should have seen the embryo developing inside him. But he never said anything.

“After Dallas was killed, I got hold of Ash’s key when he wasn’t looking and used it to access Mother, the ship’s computer. She confirmed that Ash was protecting the alien from us, making it difficult for us to catch it.

“Mother also mentioned something called Special Order Nine-three-seven. Before I could find out more, Ash came after me—tried to shove a rolled-up magazine down my throat. Parker walloped him with a steel rod, decapitating him, or he would have killed me.

“Later, we connected Ash’s head to a power source, looking for answers. He told us that Special Order Nine-three-seven directed him to take the ship to Acheron, investigate a life form, and bring it back for observation. With *discretion*, of course.”

“In other words,” Simoni suggested, “without letting the rest of you in on his agenda.”

“It was the *company’s* agenda,” Ripley reminded him. “Ash was just their puppet.”

Simoni digested the information, merged it with what he already knew. "So the signal you picked up—that was set up by the company as well?"

"No," she said. "It was sent out by an alien. But not the kind we've been talking about."

He found himself smiling. "I think you've lost me. What other kind is there?"

"Kane didn't find those eggs in a cavern," said Ripley. "He found them in the hold of a ship. An alien ship, with an alien pilot—whose chest had exploded giving birth to a encephalopod."

A chill climbed the rungs of Simoni's spine. "You mean a sentient being? From another world?"

"That's right. He was about five meters tall and covered with a layer of alien residue, but there was no mistaking that he had once been a thinking being."

*Holy shit*, Simoni thought. "Did you actually see him?"

"Not firsthand," said Ripley. "But Dallas saw him and sent the image back to the *Nostromo*."

The reporter slumped back against the bulkhead. "You know how goddamned big this is? Another sentient species out there, sharing the universe with us?"

"I know how big," said Ripley.

"All right," said Simoni, "so the signal ... it came from this alien pilot. Maybe he had some kind of tech problem, so he set down on Acheron and sent out a distress call.

"But before anybody could answer it, his chest burst open and he died. And the alien inside him must have been a queen, or Kane would never have discovered all those eggs."

"A queen," said Ripley, "yes."

"Then the *Nostromo* answered the signal," he said, trying to bring things full circle. "And Kane was impregnated. And Ash let the landing party back on the—"

*Wait a minute.*

"Something's missing," said Simoni. "Weyland-Yutani already knew there was an alien life form on Acheron. That's why they woke you out of cryo. That's why they sent Ash along."

"They heard the signal," Ripley suggested in a devil's advocate kind of way, "and knew it wasn't from a human ship."

He considered the idea—and rejected it. "Ash was operating under that order you mentioned. If he were after the pilot, he would have found a way to bring it aboard. Instead, he let the landing party return without it."

"So," said Ripley, "it was an encephalopod he wanted. But how did the company know such a thing existed? And how did Ash know the organism on Kane's face would deposit an embryo inside him?"

Simoni frowned. "Weyland-Yutani had to know the alien's *modus operandi* before it got wind of the signal."

"Right," said Ripley. "Which means the company sent a team to Acheron in advance of the *Nostromo*."

He shook his head. "Then that team could have brought back the alien on its own." He tried to read his host's expression. "So Weyland-Yutani never sent a team. They learned of the aliens' presence there through someone else."

"Such as?"

"I don't know," said Simoni. "The military?"

"No. The military would have moved in on its own. Who knew the pilot's ship had landed on Acheron?"

"Only the pilot's people," he said reflexively. Then he considered the implications. "They're the ones who told Weyland-Yutani what was on Acheron? But that would mean—"

"We spoke to them," said Ripley. "In fact, we had already been speaking to them for some time."

It just got better and better. "Who's we? You mean Earthgov?"

She shook her head. "An organization whose only purpose is to facilitate a series of transactions between the pilot's species and various elements of human civilization."

"Transactions?" Simoni echoed.

Human civilization wasn't lacking in anything he could think of. Its only problem was getting raw materials from one world to another, and ultimately to Earth.

"Originally," said Ripley, "the idea was to eliminate any areas of conflict before they could escalate into reasons for war. But after a while, it became more of a clearinghouse. If we wanted something the pilot's people could provide we traded them something they couldn't get on their own, and vice versa.

"A good deal of the time these transactions involved theft, slavery, or murder. But Earthgov had the luxury of disassociating itself from all of it."

*Unbelievable*, Simoni thought. "How did you find all this out?"

"Call caught onto it. She had hacked into Earthgov's mainframe before she left Earth the first time, and gotten the first hints then. But they were so subtle, it took a long time for her to put it all together.

"She called the organization Loki, after a shadowy and elusive god in one of Earth's ancient pantheons. After a while, the rest of us started using that name for it too.

"It was Loki who learned from the pilot's species what was on Acheron. And it was Loki who passed the information on to

Weyland-Yutani, prompting the company to insert Ash into the crew and issue special order nine-thirty-seven."

"What did the pilot's people get in return?" asked Simoni.

"A human research colony on a world called Bahgreb, which they seized without a fight a year or so later."

"The aliens were that important to us?"

Ripley grunted disdainfully. "At the time the *Nostromo* landed on Acheron, Earthgov was battling political insurgents in the plexes. It needed a bio-weapon to clean them out."

"Earthgov was going to unleash encephalopods in the plexes?" It sounded insane.

"Earthgov didn't understand what it was dealing with," she said. "No one ever does."

Simoni had to take Ripley's word for it. He had never seen an alien, only heard accounts of them from ex-military types who had served on the *Auriga*—or claimed to.

"And the people who attacked us?"

"Loki," said Ripley. "Trying to stop us from interfering in one of their deals with the pilot's people. They have the resources to clear away obstacles like the *Betty*, and you can be sure Earthgov will look the other way."

"Then why did they board us? Why not just destroy the *Betty* and be done with it?"

"Because," she said, "they wanted to know how much we knew, and who else might know it. And the only way they could do that was by seizing us and our computers."

*And when they failed, they killed themselves.* He had to admit that smacked of an intense need for secrecy. But then, there were fanatics all over the place. One didn't have to posit three-hundred year-old conspiracies to explain them.

“So what deal is it we’re interfering with?” he asked.

“Earthgov gets clearance to colonize a world rich in minerals, which the pilot’s people had laid claim to some time ago. And the pilot’s people get a colony full of human hosts.”

“Hosts?” he echoed uncomfortably. “You mean the way you were a host?”

“Exactly,” said Ripley. “The pilot’s people have obtained some eggs and seem eager to grow a pack of aliens. We haven’t figured out why, but we know where—and we intend to stop it.”

“That’s where we’re headed, then?” the reporter asked. “To save a human colony?”

“That’s where we’re headed,” Ripley confirmed. “So what do you think, Simoni? Any chance people will believe this?”

He thought about it for a moment, then shook his head. “Not a chance. At least at first. But after a while, it’ll start attracting some believers.”

“Not that it matters,” she said. “Loki’s too good at moving in the shadows. But if it makes them the least bit uncomfortable, that’ll be a good thing.”

*And if it makes me famous, Simoni thought, it will be a good thing too.*

After all, in the final analysis he didn’t care about Ripley or Call or humanity. He cared about himself. And a story like this would make him king of the web writers, then and forever more.

\* \* \*

Pandor was beginning to remember.

He could see the leathery-looking ovoid in the cryo tube, and the ghostly-white, spider-like thing at its core. He felt again his surprise at the way it shot out at him—and his horror as he realized it was going to choke him to death.

Apparently, it had stopped short of that.

"Well?" said Seigo, who was sitting next to him.

Pandor blinked and looked at him. "What is it?"

"I asked you to pass the bread, for godsakes. *Three times.*"

"Don't exaggerate," said Pandor, returning his attention to the dinner table and locating the bread basket.

"It's not an exaggeration," said Seigo, as he accepted the napkin-lined, red plastic basket and removed a small, soft dinner roll. He looked to the others who were seated with them at the long, aluminum-alloy table in the mess hall. "Am I right?"

Cody shrugged. "I wasn't really listening."

"Me either," said Gogolac.

"The hell you weren't," said Seigo. He turned to Shepherd. "Did *you* hear me ask him for the basket?"

Benedict, who was seated immediately to Pandor's right, said, "What's the difference? You got the rolls, didn't you?"

Seigo scowled at him. "It's a goddamned conspiracy. You're all out to make me insane."

"For godsakes," Gogolac interjected, "it's just a bread basket. Get over it already."

Just then the door to the room slid aside, revealing the octagonal corridor beyond. Philip was standing on the threshold, holding a tray full of steaming food.

"All right," he said, his burden filling the room with the savory smells of seasoned tomato sauce and baked cheeses. "*Buon appetito*, everybody."

It was Thursday night. They always ate Italian on Thursdays.

Placing the tray on the edge of the table, Philip offloaded three big, white ceramic dishes—a bowl full of caesar salad, a platter covered with eggplant parmigiana, and another platter piled with



baked ziti. All *homemade*, Pandor reflected. As if they had a choice in the matter.

"No meat," Seigo observed. "Again."

"As you know," said Philip, "meat's at a premium around here until the next supply ship."

"So I've heard," Seigo replied drily.

"However," Philip rejoined, "we did dig up something for the seafood lovers among us."

As he spoke the words, the door slid aside again and Angie came in, dwarfed by the platter in her hands. "Calamari marinara!" she announced in her best Italian accent—which wasn't very good at all.

Pandor found himself smiling. Calamari was his favorite dish, bar none. "Where did you find it?"

"Behind the carrot cake," said Angie, setting her platter down on the table. "Didn't even know it was there until this morning."

Philip clapped Pandor on the shoulder. "Just the thing to get you back to full strength, eh?"

"I certainly hope so," said Pandor.

"I don't know how you can eat that stuff," said Seigo, pinching his features for emphasis.

"Like this," said Benedict, spooning an oversized, sauce-drenched mound of calamari into his plate. "And like this." With his fingers, he picked up a large, meaty ring of squid flesh and popped it into his mouth. Then he chewed it with exaggerated gusto.

Seigo rolled his eyes and looked away. But Hendricks chuckled, as she often did at Benedict's antics.

"You two are like children," Gogolac said of Seigo and Benedict, "and nasty children at that."

Benedict handed Pandor the serving spoon and said, for Seigo's benefit, "Dig in, Elijah. It's a nice batch. Tender, flavorful ... I'll have

to send my compliments to the laser defroster.”

“Thanks,” said Pandor, taking the spoon and using it to put some of the calamari on his plate.

As he did so, he saw a cluster of squid tentacles poking out from the red sauce. It made him stop in mid-motion. Hadn’t the creature’s limbs looked a little like that before they wrapped themselves around his face?

“What’s the matter?” asked Angie.

Pandor felt everyone’s eyes on him. “Nothing,” he said, smiling to reassure them. “Really.” He dug his fork into the calamari and put some in his mouth.

Benedict was right. It was delicious. And with an effort, he was able to force the image of the creature from his mind.

After all, his ordeal was over. And he was recuperating nicely—Angie had said so. His throat didn’t hurt anymore and he didn’t feel dehydrated. Except for a little weariness now and then, one would never know he had been in a coma a couple of days earlier.

The whole thing was so bizarre, so unlike anything he had ever heard of. But it was behind him.

Shepherd had gone through the supply bay a second time to allay Seigo’s fears, and hadn’t found anything. There was no sign of any other ovoids, or—more importantly—any other creatures. Whatever had latched onto Pandor had been a one-of-a-kind passenger.

Of course, they were still waiting for a response from Domes Gamma as to where it had come from. It seemed unlikely that Murakami was raising such creatures on purpose. So where had they picked up the ovoid? And were there others hidden somewhere on Gamma, biding their time until they could spring at unsuspecting botanists?

Benedict interrupted Pandor's thoughts with a sound of contentment. "You don't know what you're missing, Seigo."

"Leave him alone," said Gogolac.

"All I'm doing," said Benedict, "is introducing him to the finer things in life. That's not a crime, is it?"

"What you're doing," said Gogolac, glaring at Benedict, "is nettling him. For no reason."

"You're a mind reader?" asked Benedict. "I didn't know that." He turned to Philip. "Did you?"

"Tris," said the administrator in a conciliatory tone, "this is—"

"Unnecessary?" Benedict ventured. "Uncalled for? Or is it just that everyone's too damned sensitive around here?"

"That's enough," said Shepherd.

"Why?" asked Benedict. "Because you say it is? You're a safety officer, not the dinner police."

"He's right, Tris," said Philip, backing Shepherd up for once. "You need to settle down."

Pandor was about to agree when he felt a pressure in his chest, just behind his sternum. It felt as if something was pushing to get out of him. And though at first it was just uncomfortable, it rapidly evolved into something more than that.

*It hurts*, he thought.

This time, everyone was too focused on Benedict to see the expression on Pandor's face, which must have been an unpleasant one. Pressing his fist against his chest, he tried to relieve the pressure, but it didn't help. The pain was getting intolerable.

Looking down, Pandor saw a small red blotch on his shirtfront. It was marinara sauce, a dollop he hadn't noticed—right? But it looked to him a lot like blood.

As if he had been stabbed. And hell, it *felt* as if he were being stabbed. But not from the outside—from *within*.

“Elijah?” someone said.

Then they were all looking at him again. And he couldn’t reassure them as he had before, because this time he had a feeling he might be in trouble. Grimacing, he felt the pressure build into something agonizing, something he couldn’t take sitting down.

“Elijah!” someone cried out, louder this time than the last.

As he got to his feet, his fist pushing against his chest, he heard the scrape of chairs on the floor and the rapid-fire issuing of orders. Abruptly, his colleagues were all around him, taking him by the arms and ushering him out of the mess hall.

Until, halfway to the door, Pandor felt something emerge from him—the loudest, longest, most unmannerly burp he had ever had occasion to issue in his entire life.

But all of a sudden, the pressure was gone. And so, it seemed, was the sense of urgency among Pandor’s colleagues.

“What the hell ... ?” said Cody.

Angie began to laugh. It was a beautiful sound, like the pealing of little bells.

“Are you all right?” asked Shepherd.

Pandor nodded, his cheeks hot with embarrassment. “I’m fine. Just a little gas was all.”

“How lucky are *we*?” asked Benedict.

Gogolac turned to him. “Just shut up, all right?”

“I think,” said Angie, still chuckling a little, “your digestive system is just working out the kinks. There was nothing in you for a while and then you stuffed yourself. There were bound to be a few ... anomalies.”

Pandor managed a smile. “Is that what you call them?”

Seigo muttered something to himself and returned to the table. Exchanging looks of relief, the others joined him— Pandor included. But when their banter started up again, it was less contentious. *A good thing*, Pandor reflected.

He discovered his appetite wasn't the least bit diminished by his rather unsettling experience. In fact, having cleared out some room in his digestive tract, he was even hungrier than before.

Which made it a bit easier to ignore the tentacles.

# 11

To the ancient Mayans, the kapok tree was sacred. The souls of the dead, eager for the grace of heaven, were said to climb the kapok's branches to get there.

The legend gave Philipakos pause as he used his shears to prune back the kapok's lowest tier of leaf-covered branches. He didn't want to prevent any enterprising souls from rising to heaven. But as far as he knew, none of his colleagues was on his or her way to an afterlife at the moment, and by the time anyone needed a helping branch the tier would have grown out again.

Philipakos liked pruning—especially the sweet, nutty smell of the severed wood—which was why he did so much of it. But he only worked close to the ground, leaving the higher tiers to more able souls like Shepherd, Cody, and Pandor. The last thing he wanted was to break his fool neck and leave a power struggle in his wake.

He chuckled at his own joke. As if any of his people would want his job when he was gone. *But isn't that all the more reason to live forever?*

His thought was interrupted by a buzzing in the open breast pocket of his jumpsuit. Fishing out his comm unit, he depressed the

receive button with his thumb.

Then he said, "Philipakos here."

*"It's Shepherd, Phil. I'm reading a ship on the long-range. Looks like a cargo hauler."*

They hadn't seen a ship other than a supply vessel in years. And it could hardly have wound up there by accident.

"Have they tried to communicate?"

*"Not yet,"* said Shepherd.

Philipakos looked regretfully at the half-shorn kapok and said, "I'm on my way."

\* \* \*

"See?" said Hendricks, indicating the spot.

Cody nodded. "I do."

"Looks like as good a place as any," said Pandor.

He picked out one of the two dozen violets that had arrived in the cryo tube, removed it from the back of the flivver, and set it down in the crevice Hendricks had indicated—a shallow one between two gray rocks, protected from the intensity of unfiltered sunlight by the drooping branches of a perfumed Ylang Ylang tree.

Even back on Earth, violets couldn't survive the glare of the sun. Hendricks knew how they felt. She didn't like the spotlight either.

Using his hands rather than a trowel, Pandor scooped some rich, dark soil out of a pail they had brought with them, and dumped it into the crevice. Then, gently, he patted it down around the naked root system of the violet, careful to avoid its thick, hairy leaves.

Hendricks remembered Pandor's saying that he liked the feel of the dirt, and that the day he resorted to a trowel was the day he looked for another career. She hoped that day didn't come for a while.

“How about the nutrient bath?” asked Cody, shading his eyes against the midday light.

Pandor looked at him. “I didn’t bring it. There are plenty of nutrients in the soil.”

Cody frowned. “As long as we’ve got the stuff, why not use it?”

“The way the food shipments are going,” said Pandor, “we may need some nutrient bath ourselves.”

Cody made a face. “That’s disgusting.”

Hendricks didn’t get involved in their exchange. Even if she knew for certain she wouldn’t say anything stupid, she wouldn’t know when to jump in.

Pandor turned to her. “Where’s our next spot?”

She showed him. It was a couple of meters off to the side, a shaded location between two other rocks.

“Beats me,” said Cody, “how you don’t record any of this.”

Hendricks shrugged. “I’ve got a good memory.”

People had always commented on it, as far back as she could remember. She might not have been a great intellect in other ways, but she had always had a knack for remembering things.

Picking up another violet, Cody took it over to the place Hendricks had selected and put it in the crevice. Then he picked up some soil with a trowel and poured it in around the roots.

“Aren’t you going to pat it?” asked Pandor.

Cody chuckled derisively. “Maybe I should give it a good night kiss while I’m at it.”

“I understand,” said Pandor with a twinkle in his eye, “and believe me, I admire your dedication. The sooner we finish up here, the sooner we can move on to our next job.”

Their next assignment was to change the filters in the dome’s ventilation system, so they didn’t want to complete the violet job too



quickly. No one liked changing filters— not even Philip, who seemed to like most everything.

“On the other hand,” said Cody, playing along with the joke, “I hate to shortchange the little darlings. Maybe a couple of pats are in order after all.”

Pandor smiled encouragingly. “That’s the spirit.”

“Let me show you the next spot,” said Hendricks.

“By all means,” said Cody. “You know, there was a time when I was the soul of efficiency around here. Got everything done in record time, no goofing off. Of course, that was before I was exposed to some negative influences.”

“Hey,” said Pandor, “you know what they say. You lie down with dogs, you wake up with fleas.”

Suddenly, he made a face—like the one he had made in the mess hall, only worse. *Gas again?* Hendricks wondered.

“You all right?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” he said. His voice was strained, laced with concern—more so than she would have expected. “It hurts,” he said. He pressed his fist to his chest. “In *here*.”

Hendricks frowned. *A heart attack?*

She wasn’t good at emergencies. Something in her always froze, as if she were moving in icewater.

Fortunately, Cody wasn’t so afflicted. Moving to Pandor’s side, he took the botanist by the arm and said, “We’re getting you to the infirmary.”

“I’ll call ahead,” Hendricks offered.

“It hurts,” Pandor gasped, doubling over in Cody’s grasp. “It really *hurts*. Maybe my heart ... ”

Cody didn’t answer him. But something about his expression told Hendricks that he wasn’t concerned about Pandor’s heart. He was

thinking it was something else.

*Something the face-grabber did to him*, Hendricks realized in a flash of insight.

"Make it stop," Pandor whimpered.

Suddenly, his eyes widening, he unleashed a groan the likes of which Hendricks had never heard before—a sound so deep, so uncontrollable, it made her throat close just listening to it.

Somehow, she managed to open her comm unit. "Hendricks to Angie. Something's wrong with Pandor."

*"What is it?"* came the response.

"I don't know. We're taking him to the in—"

Before she could finish, Pandor arched his back and let out another groan—even worse than the first, more grinding and more desperate. Only Cody's grip kept Pandor from falling backward.

"Screw the infirmary!" Cody barked, loud enough to be heard over Hendricks' comm link. "We need a portable here on the double!"

Pandor's hands clutched clawlike at his chest, his face caught in a rictus of agony. He seemed desperate to say something, to tell them what he was feeling, but his words appeared to catch in his throat.

*Help him*, Hendricks thought.

As if to reinforce her plea, a shriek erupted from Pandor's lips. And in the same moment, Hendricks noticed something dark and red bloom between the man's hands—a stain that looked too damned much like blood.

As if he had stabbed himself. *But that's impossible*, she insisted. Pandor's hands were empty of tools—and he couldn't have ripped himself open with just his bare hands.

"What the hell—?" said Cody, his voice low and disbelieving.

At the same time, Pandor's tunic ripped open, and something emerged from his chest in a geyser of blood. Hendricks found herself scrabbling backward across the grass, not even sure how she got down there.

The thing that had come out was blotchy with gore, so it was hard to make out any details. But it looked to Hendricks like a mound of flesh. With *teeth*.

*A head*, she thought, mesmerized.

But not a human head. Something serpentine, or aquatic maybe. She was reminded of a killer whale she had seen in a vid once, though this thing looked infinitely more vicious.

It seemed to scan its surroundings for a moment, get its bearings. Then it ripped free of Pandor altogether, a short thick body trailing behind it, and skittered off into the underbrush.

Leaving Hendricks gaping, her heart pounding, her hands shaking. Cody, who was hard to rattle, had withdrawn from Pandor as well, and he looked grimmer than she had ever seen him.

"What *was* that?" he breathed.

Hendricks wished she could tell him. But with the tears welling up in her eyes, she could barely even *see* him.

Wiping them away with the heel of her hand, she made her way over to Pandor on all fours. She found him lying on his back, the sun reflected in his staring eyes. The horrors of his travail were still evident in his expression.

And there was a hole in his chest the size of a man's fist, with a couple of bloody, cracked ribs protruding from it like the shoots of an exotic plant. Hendricks felt her gorge rise and ran into the bushes to discharge her last meal.

As if from a distance, she could hear Cody addressing his communit. "Phil," he said, his voice heavy and mournful, "would you

answer me, please? Phil ... "

Hendricks was grateful for one thing: she wasn't the one who had to give Philipakos the news.

\* \* \*

By the time Philipakos reached the control center, the cargo hauler was within an hour of the colony.

"Still no word from them? he asked Shepherd.

"Nothing," the safety officer confirmed. "And I didn't want to speak for the colony."

"Allow me, then," said Philipakos.

Sitting down behind a workstation, he sent out a standard overture. For nearly a minute, there was no response. Then the room filled with a strange voice.

It was feminine, but not at all pleasant. "*Botanical colony,*" it said, "*we read you. Go to visual.*"

"This is Domes Epsilon," he said, switching to a full audio-video array. "Please identify yourself."

The woman's features weren't unattractive. Soft dark eyes beneath gently arched brows, delicate cheekbones and sculpted nostrils, a mouth any man would have found desirable.

But there was also a hardness to her, a bitterness and a resolve that he found intimidating. Not that he would let her see that. As far as she was concerned, he wasn't scared in the least.

"*Are you the one in charge there?*" she asked, ignoring his request.

"I am," he said, doing his best to remain professional.

"*You need to open a supply bay to us.*"

Shepherd's expression turned disdainful. He seemed to be asking *Who the hell does she think she is?*

But it was Philipakos's job to remain detached in situations like this one. Holding a hand up to calm his safety officer, he resumed his conversation.

"I beg your pardon?" he said.

*"You heard me. A supply bay."*

"What's your business here?" Philipakos asked.

He felt his comm unit buzzing in his pocket, but he ignored it. He had what was clearly a more pressing matter at hand.

*"You've been exposed to something you don't understand," the woman said. "We're your only hope of surviving it. But you have to do exactly as we say, and you have to do it now."*

He felt her eyes boring into him, fixing him on the spits of their urgency. "I see," he managed to say. "And to what, exactly, have we been exposed?"

*"An alien creature," she said. "One with an irresistible urge to kill." She leaned forward slightly. "Any of your people encounter anything odd recently? A big leathery egg, maybe?"*

Philipakos felt the blood rush to his face, betraying him.

The woman cursed softly. *"Has it opened?"*

"What if it has?" he asked uncertainly.

His comm unit continued to buzz. Whatever the problem, it would have to wait.

*"Then," the woman said, "you've got even less time than I thought. The thing in the egg—its job was to latch onto a host body, shove an appendage down its throat, and deposit an embryo into its chest cavity. So one of you is carrying a developing alien inside him."*

"That's absurd," Philipakos said.

*"You won't think so when the embryo comes out."*

His eyes narrowed. "What does *that* mean?"

*"It makes its own birth canal,"* the woman explained, her mouth quirking on one side in a parody of a smile. *"Once you've seen it, you won't forget it. It's an image that tends to stay with you."*

The colony director swallowed. "No one here is carrying an alien embryo, I assure you. What's more, I—"

*"How do you know?"* she interrupted. *"Have you checked?"*

They hadn't, of course—why would they? There *was* that shadow on the resonance screen, though it hadn't occurred to anyone that it could be an embryonic life form.

"Whatever has happened," he said, knowing it was an admission that *something* had happened, "we will take care of it ourselves, with the options we have at our disposal."

*"You don't get it,"* the woman said, a current of anger rising in her voice. *"You can't take care of it. Without our help, all you can do is die."*

"Is she nuts?" Shepherd asked.

Philipakos wanted to believe it, but he couldn't. She knew too much about what had happened to Pandora.

But he also couldn't allow himself to trust her. "I'm not going to open my supply bay to a perfect stranger."

*"You already have,"* the woman told him. *"What you need now are some imperfect strangers."*

Philipakos's comm unit buzzed on relentlessly, sawing at the edge of his consciousness.

"How do you know what's happened here?" he asked. "And why are you so interested in helping us?"

She frowned. *"We don't have time for this. You've got five minutes to open a supply hatch. After that, we'll make our own way inside. It's up to you."*

Philipakos felt his mouth go dry. "You can't just force your way in here."

*"Can't we?"* she asked.

She wasn't bluffing—he could see it in her eyes. And haulers like hers had adaptable docking ports, a necessity if they were to trade personnel and materials with the vast variety of vessels they might encounter.

But she wouldn't be able to get in without cutting through the hatch, which would render the bay useless in the process. And without a working supply bay, the colonists would be forced to resort to their backup facility to receive basic supplies—an unacceptable state of affairs.

Because if the backup malfunctioned, they wouldn't be able to abandon the Domes in the event of an emergency. And though they had yet to experience a problem of that magnitude, at least one other domed colony had done so.

Nor was anyone on Earth going to authorize a repair of their supply hatch. They were lucky to get fresh food occasionally, much less a repair crew.

*Plus*, Philipakos thought, *there's no telling where these people will stop*. In the course of their hunt, they might compromise the integrity of one of the domes, forcing the colonists to isolate it and shut it down—and take a chance on losing whatever precious flora was growing there.

He wished the colony had been built with an eye to repelling intruders. Unfortunately, its architects hadn't expected the place to become a raiding target. All it held were plants, after all, and few of them had any value on the black market.

"Four minutes and thirty seconds," the woman told him.

"What are you going to do?" Angie whispered.

*What indeed?* he wondered.

He almost told the hauler to go to hell. The words were on his tongue, full of spite and fire. Then he saw a text message appear in the upper right corner of his screen— something from Cody.

And thought, *My god*.

\* \* \*

Ripley's instincts told her that the botanist was going to make her earn her way into his colony. Then she saw him go pale, as if he had seen or heard something too horrible for him to contemplate, and her screen went blank.

"He cut us off," said Call.

Ripley turned to her. "You sound surprised."

"How can they be so stupid?"

"Happens all the time," Ripley told her.

There were always people who thought they could outrun the aliens. Or outsmart them. Or go toe to toe with them, if they had the fortitude and sufficient firepower.

Weyland-Yutani had believed it could tame the encephalopods. It thought it could train the aliens to perform like killer house pets. *Roll over. Beg. Make dead*. But in time, Weyland-Yutani learned the error of its ways.

These colonists would too, if Ripley gave them the opportunity. But she wouldn't. She hadn't come all this way to let them kill themselves.

"Hang on a second," said Call, her features caught in the golden glare of her monitor screen.

"What is it?" Ripley asked. An ultimatum, maybe? That would be entertaining.

"Come look," said Call.

Ripley looked.



The graphic on Call's screen said they had access to the colony's supply bay. "How about that," said Ripley. "Maybe they're not so stupid after all."

"I wonder what made them change their minds," said Call.

"What's the difference?" Ripley asked. "The important thing is we're in."

\* \* \*

"Not good," said Shepherd, consulting his monitor screen.

Philipakos didn't respond to the remark. He was obviously too shaken by what had happened to Pandor, too deep in shock and mourning to be easily roused.

It wasn't just that Pandor had died. It was the way he had died—something bursting out of his chest, just as the woman in the hauler said it would.

*"It's an image that tends to stay with you,"* she had told Philipakos. No doubt, it would stay with Cody and Hendricks a long time.

Shepherd was stunned too. Pandor had been his colleague, his neighbor, his friend. But there was nothing more he could do for the guy. His responsibility now was to look after the rest of them—a task that had just gotten more complex.

"What's the matter, Shep?" Philipakos asked at last.

The safety officer glanced at him. "The supply hatch is closed, and it won't open again."

"What do you mean?" Philipakos said, as the import of the statement began to sink in.

"It won't respond—which means the people from the cargo hauler can't get inside."

Philipakos made a visible effort to pull himself together. "We can still open it manually, right?"

“Maybe,” said Shepherd. “There’s no way to find out except to go there. But to do that, we’d have to cross Domes Two, Three, and Four, and if that alien is one-tenth as deadly as the hauler woman says it is ...”

Philipakos winced. “What’s the alternative?”

“The backup bay,” said Shepherd. “But that’s even farther away.”

“Get me the cargo hauler,” said the administrator. “I have to tell them there’s a problem.”

But they were in a deeper hole than Shepherd had thought. Because when he tried to open a link, he found the comm system was down.

“You’re not going to like this,” he told Philipakos, and imparted the details.

The director slumped in his chair. “So not only can’t we open the hatch, we can’t tell our friends out there we’ve got a problem.”

“That’s about the size of it,” said Shepherd.

“Seems like quite a coincidence,” Philipakos observed.

Shepherd thought so too. Apparently, someone was trying to keep the colonists from receiving outside help. The first question he had to answer was who.

The second was why.

# 12

Philipakos scanned the faces of his colleagues. Clearly, they had picked up on his anxiety, because it was mirrored in their eyes.

“What the hell is going on?” Seigo demanded.

“I’d like to know too,” said Cody, albeit in a more controlled tone of voice.

Philipakos’s heart sank. *How can I tell them? I scarcely believe it myself.*

He plunged ahead. “Elijah’s dead.”

“Oh my god,” breathed Gogolac, her hand rising like a frightened bird to her mouth. “How?”

“Apparently,” said Philipakos, forcing the words out one by one, “the thing on Elijah’s face had a purpose after all—to insert an embryonic alien life-form into his chest cavity.”

“What ... ?” said Seigo, the color draining from his face.

“That’s crazy,” said Gogolac.

Philipakos nodded. “I know.”

“We saw something on our scans,” Angie remarked with a break in her voice, “but we didn’t know what it was.”

"Once the life-form was sufficiently developed," Philipakos went on, "it burst out of Elijah's chest, killing him instantly. Unfortunately, Cody and Hendricks were witnesses."

"It was every bit as hideous as it sounds," Cody told the others.

"So where is it?" Gogolac asked. "The life-form, I mean."

"Somewhere in Dome Four," said Cody.

"Not necessarily," Hendricks pointed out, drawing the attention of her colleagues. "The doors were set to let Rex roam, remember? The alien could have gone through them too."

"Shit," said Seigo, his eyes widening as he thought about it, "she's right."

"So this thing could be anywhere?" Gogolac asked.

"Pretty much," Shepherd confirmed.

"How dangerous is it?" asked Gogolac.

"It burst out of Pandor's goddamn chest!" Seigo sputtered.

Gogolac shot him a look. "To *us*, I mean."

"Extremely dangerous," Shepherd told her. He glanced at Philipakos. "At least, that's what we've been told."

Seigo eyed them. "By whom?"

"That's a good question," said Philipakos.

Gogolac looked at him askance. "If you're trying to reassure us, Phil, it's not working."

"Just before Elijah died," said Philipakos, "we were contacted by a cargo hauler. Her captain seems to know a lot about these creatures. She warned us about Elijah, but not in time."

"Wait a minute," said Seigo. "We're relying on a cargo hauler for our information?"

"Have you got a better idea?" asked Shepherd.

"Hell, yes," said Seigo. "Contact the military. Contact Earthgov. Someone must have run into this thing before."

"Unfortunately," said Philipakos, forced again to be the bearer of bad news, "we've lost communications. We can't even speak with the cargo hauler anymore."

"That's great," said Seigo.

"So what do we do?" Cody asked. "We can't stay in the control center the rest of our lives."

"We'll have to find the thing," said Gogolac, "and kill it. What other option do we have?"

"Shepherd's got a shock rifle," Hendricks noted helpfully.

*True*, thought Philipakos. It was the only weapon in the colony. Until an hour ago, it had seemed superfluous.

"I could give it a shot," said Shepherd. "The tough part will be finding it."

"There are only twelve domes," said Seigo. "It's got to be in one of them."

"Thanks," said Shepherd.

"Maybe you'd like to go with him?" Cody suggested. "Since you're such an expert on the layout of the place."

Seigo turned red. "I'm not the safety officer, am I?"

Philipakos held his hands up for peace. "Stop it. We're all on edge, but we need to use our heads." He turned to Shepherd. "If it comes to it, we can hunt the thing down. But first, I'd like to see if we can re-establish contact with the hauler. If there's hunting to be done, those people will probably do it better than we would."

Shepherd nodded. "Makes sense."

Philipakos knew his safety officer was itching to go after the thing. However, it was Shepherd's job to defer to his superior whenever possible.

"Hey," said Hendricks, "where's Benedict?"

Philipakos's stomach tightened. "He hasn't responded yet."

They looked at each other. "Doesn't mean he's not on his way," Cody pointed out hopefully.

Philipakos frowned. It was certainly possible Benedict was still on his way and just hadn't arrived. But more likely he was asleep somewhere, unaware there was a creature on the loose.

"I'll bring him in," Shepherd said dutifully.

It tore Philipakos up inside that his friend might be in danger. However, he had already made his decision.

"We'll stick to the plan," he told Shepherd. "Let's try to fix the comm system first."

Angie looked approving. For once, Philipakos hadn't given Benedict special treatment.

He just hoped he didn't wind up regretting it.

\* \* \*

Ripley came back to the cargo bay scowling. Simoni and the others were all there to see it—except Bolero, who had called Ripley up to the cockpit a couple of minutes earlier.

"You don't look happy," Vriess observed.

"I'm not," Ripley said. "The supply hatch closed again. And we seem to have lost communications with the colony."

Simoni saw Johner made a face. "You're frickin' kidding me. I thought they changed their minds."

"Maybe they changed them back again," said Vriess.

Call shook her head. "Something smells fishy." She darted a glance at Johner. "And we don't need any remarks."

Johner held his hands out. "What did I say?"

"You think Loki did this?" Rama asked Call.

Call shrugged. "Too big a coincidence otherwise."

"The bottom line," said Vriess, "is we can't get into the colony."

"So they're screwed," Johner concluded.

"No one's screwed," Call insisted, "as long as we're here to do something about it."

Johner rolled his eyes. "Whatever you say, little girl. Don't get your knickers in a twist."

Rama stroked his chin. "So we've got to get to them *without* access to a supply hatch."

Vriess turned to Ripley. "What's the plan?"

Having gotten to know the way the crew worked, Simoni wasn't surprised. Each member was resourceful in his or her own way, but Ripley was unquestionably the most resourceful.

She frowned into space for a moment, then went to the bulkhead and punched in a link to Bolero. "How difficult would it be to smash our way into a dome?"

Bolero mulled the question. "*Not very. But more than likely, an auto-protect would activate and the adjoining domes would seal themselves off.*"

Johner made a face to show he wasn't impressed. "Let 'em. Call can jimmy the locks."

Simoni remembered that Call had a talent in that area. Wasn't it she who had gotten them out of Byzantium?

"That would take a while," said Call, putting a damper on Johner's enthusiasm. "And every time we went from dome to dome, we would be compromising another environment— including that of the control center, eventually."

Rama's eyes narrowed. "It's all right. We won't shatter a dome. We'll just cut an entranceway into it."

"And use what to stop it up?" Johner demanded. "Vriess's butt?"

"Or your face," Vriess snapped back at him.

Rama sighed. "We'll approach it as if it were a hatch— create an airtight docking seal, open our lock, slice our way through the dome,

and drop down inside. And the ship can remain there until we've done what we came for."

"You say *we*," Johner chuckled, "like there's a chance in a billion you'll be down there with us."

Rama didn't take the bait. He just looked to Ripley.

"Let's do it," she said.

\* \* \*

"Is she out of her *mind*?" Seigo asked, echoing what most everyone in the control center must have been wondering.

Except Shepherd.

He shook his head as he stared at his monitor, which he had tied into the colony's external security system. Communications was unresponsive, no matter how the safety officer tried to reroute its signals, but external security was still working.

"Actually," said Shepherd, taking in the incongruous sight of the cargo hauler sitting on Dome Seven, "she's not out of her mind at all. She knows exactly what she's doing."

"Which is what?" asked Cody.

"She's preparing to pierce the dome," Shepherd explained, "and lower some of her people inside. Which means we should see them before too long."

If they were telling the truth about why they wanted access to the domes. And if the life-form that came out of Pandor didn't get them first.

"What about the specimens inside the dome?" asked Angie.

Shepherd glanced at her. "They're history."

Years earlier, that wouldn't have bothered him so much. They were just plants, after all. But having worked with Philipakos and the others, he felt their loss.



"There must be a way to save them," said Gogolac.

Shepherd turned to her. "I can't think of one. Can you?"

Apparently, she couldn't.

"Somebody needs to say this," Shepherd continued, "and it might as well be me. If this creature is as dangerous as we've been led to believe, we may have to take measures we're not thrilled with. Before we're done, other domes may be compromised."

"Don't you think you're being a little extreme?" asked Cody. "I mean, I don't want to diminish what happened to Pandor, but it's just an animal. There must be a way to deal with it without wrecking everything we've worked for."

"No one here has worked harder than I have," said Philipakos, his voice quiet but compelling. "No one has given more of himself to these domes. But I would sacrifice every last one of them before I'd let a human being die."

That effectively ended the argument, and in a way of which Shepherd approved. But then, there was a reason he and Philipakos had always gotten along.

"You know," Hendricks said out of nowhere, "Dome Seven was always my favorite."

Shepherd didn't know what to say to that—none of them did. Feeling helpless, he went back to watching his screen.

\* \* \*

Call touched a stud on the intercom grid and asked, "How's it going up there?"

"*Tell you in a second,*" said Bolero, her voice echoing in the *Betty's* cargo bay.

Normally, she would simply have nudged the *Betty* up against the facility with which she was docking. In this instance, she hadn't have

that luxury. She'd had to assume an unorthodox posture that had her aft quarters sitting on the apex of a dome with her nose facing in the opposite direction, making her look like a bird giving birth to an enormous egg.

"Got it," said Bolero, with a hint of satisfaction in her voice. "*You can open the doors anytime.*"

Call looked to Ripley, who—with Johner's help—had taken down some of the support chains hanging from the ceiling and linked them together. Only the rearmost was left hanging from the cargo hold's superstructure so it could serve as an anchor.

"Open them," said Ripley.

Call could have gone to the freestanding control panel in the rear of the bay and carried out the order. However, Vriess had a remote control governing several of the *Betty's* operations built into the armrest of his chair.

With a few quick taps of his fingers, he got the doors moving apart—one sinking into a slot in the deck and the other rising into a similar slot in the ceiling. Beyond them was a flexible black accordion structure designed to allow the *Betty* to dock with any vessel, regardless of disparities in their designs.

In this case, of course, the *Betty* had affixed with a vessel. She hadn't docked herself to the surface of the dome, which looked like a giant, unblinking eye in the confines of the accordion.

"How's it look?" Bolero asked.

"Fine," said Call.

She couldn't hear the hiss that would have told them the seal was imperfect and they were losing air into the vacuum. In that event, she would have had to close the doors, and asked Bolero to try it again.

Only if the seal were really bad would they have had a crisis. *What the hell*, she thought. *Might be fun getting sucked out into space little by little.*

That was what happened to the alien-human hybrid back on the *Auriga*. Call could still see the desolate, betrayed look on its face as its guts were yanked out into the vacuum.

It was screaming something that sounded a lot like “Mama ... ” And Ripley, who had engineered the hybrid’s destruction, could only look on—bearing the guilt of having destroyed something that placed its trust in her.

Hearing the grating retraction of a hatch door, Call looked back over her shoulder to see Johner, Krakke, Rama, and Simoni file into the bay, one after the other.

Vriess, meanwhile, had removed a Wal-Mart 2000 deluxe laser torch from its slot on the side of his chair and was adjusting it to the aperture and level of intensity he desired. He had used the torch strictly for repairs to that point, but it possessed higher settings as well.

The little man urged his chair forward until he got to the slightly convex surface of the dome. Then he ignited the torch, eliciting a seething red beam less than a centimeter in width and as many as twenty in length.

“Here goes,” he said.

The surface of the dome hissed and spit, putting up a fight. It took Vriess almost a minute to burn his way through the reinforced plastic, in the process creating a smelly, black plume of smoke. Then he moved his beam to the left, extending the hole he had made into a cut about a meter long.

“Any way to speed this up?” asked Johner.

“Why?” asked Vriess, wiping away a bead of sweat that had meandered into his eyes. “You got somewhere to go?”

“Yeah,” said Johner. “A hot date with your mom.”

The little man chuckled as he began to cut a line downward. “Check your pockets when you’re done. Mom could see the dumb ones coming a mile away.”

Ripley didn’t say anything. She just stood there watching from the shadows, a hunter waiting for her prey.

Call, on the other hand, was peering past the torch and its smoking incision at the lush green world inside the dome, which was oriented at a ninety-degree angle to her and her comrades. It was an eerie feeling looking straight ahead at something that should be right have been beneath her.

It would be even stranger descending into it. She wondered at what point the ship’s gravity field would yield to that of the dome, and *forward* would suddenly become *down*.

Finally, Vriess embarked on his last cut—another vertical one, which would end at his starting point. It seemed to take longer than the others, maybe because it was aiming for a specific target.

Call was tempted to ask what Johner had asked about speeding things up. After all, the more time they spent up there, the more time the alien had to mature.

However, the dome was made of immensely strong material, or it couldn’t have withstood the difference in pressure between its enclosed atmosphere and the vacuum beyond. It was a credit to Vriess’s skill that they were getting through at all.

“All right,” he said, deactivating the torch and replacing it on his chair. “Looks like we’re in.”

Krakke came forward with a suction handle and clamped it onto the dome in the middle of Vriess’s cuts. Then he planted his feet and

yanked—and with a squeal of grating plastic, pulled away a meter-wide square of the stuff.

Instantly, Call got a faceful of warm, wet air, redolent with a wild bouquet of perfumes. If she had ever smelled anything like it in her life, she had long ago forgotten.

“The place stinks,” said Johner.

“To you,” said Vriess, “everything stinks.”

While his comrades were exchanging remarks, Krakke carried the section of dome across the bay and deposited it in an unused corner. Obviously, it wasn’t as heavy as it looked. And yet, it had held back the airless night of space for decades.

*They don’t make things the way they used to,* Call reflected.

By then, Ripley had dragged the end of their extended chain over to the docking port. Drawing it into a coil, she reached back and flung it at the hole Vriess had made.

The chain looped through the air until it got into the dome’s gravitational field. Then it made a right-angle turn and plummeted, as any length of chain would have plummeted if dropped from a significant height, until it disappeared into the thick, green canopy of the jungle and—if they had estimated the distance correctly—pooled on the unseen ground below it.

That left one section of chain running from the heights of the cargo bay almost straight down to the aperture in the dome, and a second section running perpendicular to the first from the aperture to the jungle floor.

Call glanced up at the chain’s bitter end. It seemed to be holding just fine—an important consideration in light of what they were about to attempt next.

Naturally, Ripley went first. She was the strongest of them, the one with the most finely tuned senses, and the one with the most

experience when it came to the aliens.

*Three good reasons*, Call thought.

Truthfully, Ripley could have negotiated the descent without even bothering with the chain. However, she would have crashed through any number of branches on the way down, and she didn't want to reach the floor of the dome at a disadvantage.

So she took hold of the chain, swung her feet around it, and slid herself through the opening. Once inside the dome she continued to slide, albeit at a different angle to her observers.

Before she had lowered herself halfway to the ground, Johner followed her through the breach. Just beyond it, he looked back at Call and the others and said, "Wild." Then he resumed his descent.

Call went third. Though Ripley and Johner had made the drop look easy, the android didn't find it that way, as the chain was hard to grip with either her hands or her feet.

Nonetheless, she reached the treetops without incident. Looking up, she took a moment to regard the *Betty*—a dark and unlikely blotch against the heavens. It crowded out the sun, casting a dense black shadow on the landscape.

Krakke was coming through the aperture, bringing up the rear. Once Call saw that he was descending without trouble, she lowered herself into the canopy.

It was dark there, unexpectedly so. But then, the branches around her were heavily laden with leaves, and so close they blocked her view of everything beyond them.

Ignoring their intimacy, Call kept going. And after what seemed like too long a time, she emerged from the underside of the canopy. Her comrades were waiting for her on the forest floor, the end of the chain coiled between them.

There was no sign of the alien. But then, the android hadn't expected there to be. *You don't get a glimpse of them*, she thought as she reached the ground, *until it's too late*.

"About time you got here," said Johner. He was glancing this way and that, his rifle ready to swivel at the first sign of trouble.

"Sorry," said Call. "I stopped to do some sightseeing. I haven't seen a tree since we left Earth."

He grunted. "Like I give a shit."

Ripley didn't say anything. She didn't scan the place. She just stood there, her eyes narrowed ever so slightly, her razor-sharp senses on high alert.

The smell of wildflowers and tree blossoms was even stronger down there than above. Call had a chance to sample it as she slipped her weapon from her back and waited for Krakke.

He came into view a few seconds later, as silent as ever, and dropped the last few meters. The moment his heels hit the ground, Ripley gestured and said, "Let's go."

Call followed without comment, as watchful as her comrades. But as she searched for signs of the alien, she also did her best to appreciate the aesthetics of the place.

Because for all she knew, the trees around her only existed in that particular dome. And when the *Betty* pulled away, her mission there completed one way or the other, she would leave a gaping hole through which all the air would escape—taking much of the flora with it and killing the rest.

*A pity*, Call thought. *But you can't make an omelet without breaking a few eggs*.

Or so she had heard.

# 13

Benedict felt a warmth on his face that wasn't there before. Shading his eyes, he opened them—and saw that the sun had moved beyond the pale of the tree looming over him.

*Must have fallen asleep,* he told himself.

Little by little, it came back to him. The Staghorn inventory. And of course, the sinjaba.

Benedict wondered how long he had been out of it. *An hour?* At least that, judging by the pit in his stomach.

*Hope I haven't missed dinner,* he thought. Rolling over onto his belly, he pushed himself up on all fours. Then, laboriously, he got to his feet.

That was when he stopped. And turned to his left. And peered into the stand of mahogany trees.

For just a moment, he thought he had glimpsed something among the trees, sliding through the shadows. But now that he looked that way, he was less certain of it. Finally, he chalked it up to his hallucinogen-addled imagination and moved on.

Or at least, he was about to. Then, out of the corner of his eye, he saw it again.



Chuckling to himself, Benedict affixed his flattened hand against his forehead for shade and tried to get a better look at the thing. It was definitely moving—slowly and languidly like a well-fed preying mantis, but moving nonetheless.

He smiled. There weren't any oversized insects in the Domes—just the few tiny ones they needed to make the ecosystems work. *So it can't be an insect*, he told himself. *No way.*

It had to be a branch moving in the breeze. Branches were all they had there in the Domes—branches full of leaves, branches full of needles, long branches and short ones. *Branches in every goddamned place you look.*

And the occasional human being. But Benedict was getting better and better at avoiding *those*. Turning off his comm unit helped. That way, he was never in contact when he didn't want to be in contact.

*Like now, for instance.*

As he watched, amused, the thing in the shadows moved again. Or maybe it was a different thing this time. With the leaf-stuff clouding his mind, it was difficult for Benedict to be sure.

*Get closer, you idiot*, he thought good-naturedly.

Following his own advice, he found he could make it out, despite the shadows. It was dark, almost skeletal looking, and it stood on two stalks instead of one.

*Like a man*, he mused.

More likely, it was an intersection of two narrow tree trunks, joined by his mind into what seemed like a single structure. But it pleased Benedict to think of it as bipedal.

His smile broadened like a child's. What can it be? *Animal? Vegetable? Mineral?* A pure product of his hallucinogen-soaked imagination, constructed out of thin air?

Delighted with the idea of a mystery, he moved closer to it. He just hoped he wasn't disappointed when the mystery was solved.

\* \* \*

Ripley and her companions had traversed two domes' worth of terrain by the time they reached the dark octagonal entrance to the colony's control center, so they were glad to see how easily the door slid open for them.

Moving inside, they found themselves in another dimly lit passage, just like the ones that mediated between one domed environment and the next. Then the door opened at the far end, and they saw an older man with a mane of gray hair.

It was the administrator with whom Ripley had spoken earlier. What was his name? *Philipakos*.

"Welcome," he said, his voice more fluid than it had seemed over the comm link.

"Where are the others?" Ripley asked.

Without hesitation, Philipakos jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "Back there."

"Let's see them," she said.

After all, it might have been a trap. Hadn't Philipakos refused to grant Ripley and her people access to the domes until she said she would find a way in on her own? Even botanists could be dangerous creatures if they felt threatened.

"This way," said Philipakos.

He led them up a short ramp into the center of a round, well-lit facility. Its observation ports afforded Ripley a three hundred and sixty degree view of the immediately surrounding domes.

Beneath nearly every port was a computer workstation. Only one of them was manned at the moment. The other colonists—three

women and two men—were standing in a group at the side of the center opposite the ramp.

All five of them regarded Ripley with the same awkward mixture of relief and wariness. Obviously they still didn't trust her, even after she had shown them she knew what she was talking about.

"I hope you've got the safeties on those burners," said the man at the workstation, a brawny specimen whose brown safety officer's jacket had his name embroidered on its breast.

*Shepherd*. It was a fitting name for someone in charge of security. Especially when he was dealing with so helpless a flock.

"They *have* no safeties," said Ripley, which was the truth. Krakke had made them that way.

Shepherd looked skeptical. However, he wasn't the important one in the group. Neither was Philipakos. The colonist Ripley needed to find was the one with the embryo growing in his chest—the one who would soon give birth to a monster.

Sniffing the air, she tried to figure out which of them it was. But she couldn't discern the scent. That meant the afflicted one was somewhere else.

"The one who had the spidery thing on his face—where is he?" she demanded.

"He's dead," said Philipakos.

It was the truth. Ripley could tell.

"How long ago?" she asked.

"About the time you contacted us," he said.

One of the other men stepped forward. He was thin, balding, with sharp features and a voice to match. "You're going to hunt it down," he said, "right?"

Ripley shook her head. "Not a chance."

The sharp-featured man turned to Philipakos. "I thought they were going to get rid of this thing?"

"You don't understand," said Ripley. "The alien is the hunter here. The best thing we can do is try to escape it in one piece. Right now, it's still early in its maturation process. If we move quickly, we'll get out of here alive."

"You mean *leave*?" said one of the women—a hard-looking individual with close-cropped hair the color of sand. "Just like that? You know how long we've lived here?"

Ripley eyed her. "I know how long you'll live if the alien gets a hold of you. This isn't a termite infestation. We're talking about something more deadly than any predator you've ever imagined."

She could recite Ash's assessment of the species word for word. It was imprinted on her brain like all of her predecessor's memories.

*The alien is a perfect organism—superbly structured, cunning, quintessentially violent.* With your limited capabilities you have no chance against it.

"And," Ripley added, "they've wiped out colonies a damned sight bigger than this one."

"Why haven't I heard of any of these colonies?" asked the woman with the sand-colored hair. "Why weren't we warned?"

"Because," Ripley said as reasonably as she ever said anything, "there are people who don't want you to know. But that discussion will have to wait. First we need to get you out of here."

"This is our home," Philipakos explained. "We can't abandon it without exploring every option open to us."

"You already have," said Johner, who had managed to stay quiet to that point. "You just don't know it."

"Wait a minute," said Shepherd, undeterred by Johner's brawn. "Doctor Philipakos is raising a legitimate question."

"Doctor Philipakos can kiss my hairy ass," said Johner. "We didn't come here to hold your wittle hands. We came to evacuate the place, and that's what we're—"

Ripley cut him short with a gesture. "What Johner is saying," she translated, "is that you're not in a position to consider alternatives. You have to leave now."

The safety officer started to protest, but Philipakos held a hand up. "It's all right, Shep. These people know what we're dealing with better than we do."

"What if we want to stay?" said the fourth man, a fellow with dark skin and darker hair.

Philipakos turned to him. "I've already decided that we'll go, Cody."

"*You* have," said the dark-skinned man, "but what about the rest of us?" He looked around the room. "This is our home. Maybe it's worth a little risk."

"Just what I was thinking," said the sandy-haired woman.

Ripley felt like telling them to suit themselves. But she couldn't leave them there. Not when the aliens needed hosts, and humans had proven themselves to be so capable in that regard.

"Listen," she said, "what happened to your colleague wasn't an accident. It was meant to happen. And it's going to happen again, one way or another, if you try to stay."

She looked from one of them to another. "Some of you must have seen what happened to him. The agony he was in. The way the creature exploded from his chest."

One of the women flinched. She had dark hair pulled into a ponytail and light-colored eyes.

"We're getting you out of here," Ripley said, brooking no arguments. "It's the only option that makes any sense."

"My thoughts exactly," said Philipakos. Then he seemed to remember something, and said "Son of a bitch."

Ripley had a feeling she knew why. But then, she had been down this road before. "Who's missing?"

"Benedict," said Philipakos. He looked concerned and exasperated at the same time. "He didn't respond to my summons, probably because he's fallen asleep."

"Asleep?" Johner echoed, a note of derision in his voice.

"He does that," said the administrator, looking not the least bit happy about it.

"I'll find him," said Shepherd, getting up from his chair and starting for the ramp.

As he walked by Ripley, she grabbed his forearm. "Don't bother. You won't find him."

The safety officer pulled his arm back, an expression of resentment on his face. "I hate to tell you," he said evenly, "but you don't give the orders around here."

"I'm just letting you know," she said, "your friend is meat. You'd do better to forget about him."

Shepherd's jaw muscles rippled. "Benedict is my responsibility. I don't abandon people."

Ripley felt something stiffen inside her. *I don't either.* But they always seemed to find a way to die anyway.

Like Newt. And Hicks. She thought she had saved them from the aliens—those two, if no one else. But they had perished when their evac vehicle crash landed on Fiorina.

Call came forward. "If you go after Benedict," she explained to Shepherd, "the alien will get you too."

"How can you be so certain the creature has gotten hold of him?" Philipakos asked.

"We're not new to this," said the android. "If you want to survive, you'll follow our lead."

Philipakos turned to Ripley again and studied her face. Then he said in a soft voice, "Get Benedict and bring him back here, Shep. As quickly as possible."

"Done," said Shepherd, and made for the exit again.

"You don't get it," Call snapped at Philipakos. "You send him out there, you'll lose him too."

The administrator looked torn, but he said, "We'll have to take that risk."

Ripley sighed. *Why do people always have to learn the hard way?* "Go with him," she told Call.

Call shot a glance at her, as if to say, *Why me?*

*Because you're more durable than the others, and because you've faced the aliens before.* Besides, Ripley had something else in mind for herself and Johner.

"Go," she told Call.

"I'm going," her comrade said reluctantly. Then she followed Shepherd out of the control center.

"I don't understand," said the smallest of the botanists, a woman who looked more like a little girl than an adult. "If this life-form is too dangerous for Shepherd to confront, why isn't it too dangerous for your friend?"

Johner laughed. It was an ugly sound, even when one had gotten used to it. "Call is a lot tougher than she looks."

"In the meantime," said Ripley, "we've got to evacuate the rest of you, and some of you won't make it up the chains we dropped. Is there another way out besides your supply bay?"

Philipakos nodded. "There's a backup. As far as we know, it's still working. But it's way on the other side of the colony, at the far end

of Dome Sixteen."

Ripley considered the information. "What kind of ground vehicles do you have here?"

"We call them flivvers," said Philipakos. "They're actually solar-powered Wal-Mart Runabouts. Not much in the speed department, but they get us around."

"Where are they?" she asked.

"Parked outside," said Cody. "One of them's still got Pandor's bloody body in it."

Philipakos heaved a sigh. "Poor Elijah."

"All right," said Ripley. "Krakke is going to stay here, in case the alien gets in somehow."

"What?" said the man with the sharp features. "How can it do that? Everything's locked."

Ripley ignored him. "Call and Shepherd will be taking a flivver?" she asked Philipakos.

The botanist nodded.

"Then Johner and I will take the other one, and check the backup supply bay."

"What about Pandor?" asked Cody.

"He won't be coming with us," said Ripley.

\* \* \*

Simoni waited until he was sure the others were in the *Betty's* cockpit, occupied with one thing or another. Then he made his way back to the cargo hold and approached the docking port.

It made him sick to his stomach to see the way Ripley's extended chain made an unnatural turn and projected forward into the depths of the dome. *As if it were held there by magic*, he thought, and that made him even queasier.



To that point, he had always been certain of up and down, if nothing else. Now he didn't know *what* was going on.

*But that isn't going to stop me,* he thought.

Down in the dome, the tops of the trees looked restless in what must have been an artificial breeze. As if they knew their sanctum had been invaded and were uncomfortable with the idea.

Even if that were so, one more invader wouldn't hurt. *Especially if he's just there to observe all the others.*

Simoni wrapped his fingers around the chain at the point just before it entered the dome's grav field and made its turn. If it held the likes of Johner, it would certainly hold him.

He could take it all the way down to the ground. Then he could go wherever Ripley and her companions had gone. And there wasn't a single person there to stand in his way. It was a heady thought, a thought that invited possibilities.

Simoni hadn't subjected himself to any serious physical exertion in a long time. Certainly, he hadn't done any climbing, and returning up the chain might present a problem.

On the other hand, there was a chance they could fix the colony's supply hatch, and then he wouldn't have to climb back. He could leave the place like a civilized being, on his own two feet.

But he couldn't count on that. *So if you go down,* he admonished himself, *you have to be prepared to go up again.*

He pictured Ripley down among the trees, a shock rifle in her arms, hunting as she had hunted in centuries past. It would make his piece that much more compelling if he could see her in that mode, bring it to life.

Then he again considered the climb back, and his stomach clenched. Nor would it stop clenching.

In the end, Simoni's curiosity was more powerful than his sense of self-preservation. But then, that was why he had become a reporter to begin with, wasn't it? Because he was too curious for his own good—and often other people's as well?

Taking hold of the chain in both hands, he hooked one leg around it and then the other. Then he closed his eyes and, as quickly as possible, slid forward.

He was prepared for the shift in gravity at the bend in the chain, but not the wave of vertigo that accompanied it. After all, he hadn't seen Ripley or the others experience any discomfort.

Then the dizziness passed, and Simoni allowed himself to slide down the chain hand over hand. It wasn't easy on either his shoulders or his legs, but it wasn't that difficult either.

Sooner than he would have thought possible, he had descended to the level of the tallest treetops. Moments later he began to penetrate the canopy, following the chain down through a sea of dark, leafy branches.

Simoni smiled to himself, never having been so high up in a tree before. It was unexpectedly peaceful. He made a mental note of the fact, knowing how much his readers loved colorful details.

It smelled really nice too. All in all, it was a remarkably pleasant experience—the kind people might pay for, if it were packaged as an exotic vacation. He made a note of that as well.

Finally, he reached the ground and tried to get his bearings. But he had turned around several times in the course of his descent, so he wasn't sure which way was which.

*There's one sure way to find out,* he mused, and searched for a slice of sunlit ground. Planting himself on it, he looked up and caught sight of the *Betty*.

She was squatting precisely on the highest point of the dome, which rendered her the equivalent of a huge sundial. Fortunately, Simoni remembered the direction in which her shadow had fallen, which was coincidentally in the same quarter as the exit for which Ripley had headed.

Looking at the ship now, with the sun beating on her near flank, the reporter determined that his path lay almost straight ahead. *That way it is*, he thought cheerfully.

And for a half-dozen strides, he continued to feel that way. Then the canopy above him seemed to grow thicker and the slivers of sunlight disappeared, and the nature of his journey changed. It wasn't a careless jaunt anymore. It was a passage from one well of shadow into another, and what little he could see didn't look promising.

*Come on*, he told himself. *You want this story or not?* There was only one answer to such a question.

Simoni had followed Ripley's trail across the vastness of space, never knowing if his diligence would pay off. But he had hung onto his dream. Now that he was on the verge of realizing it, he wasn't going to let a few shadows throw him off.

It was slow going for a while. Slow and uncertain. But after a while he saw slivers of light again, and knew by them he was well on his way to the exit.

*Well*, he thought, *that wasn't so bad*.

As he went on, the canopy thinned some more. Sunlight became more plentiful. He breathed more easily.

He wasn't sure what made him look back over his shoulder. Something glimpsed at the edge of his vision? A sound too soft to register at the conscious level?

Whatever it was, he turned and saw someone coming down the chain from the *Betty*. Simoni shaded his eyes against the unfiltered sunlight to get a better view, came to the conclusion that the figure was a man.

*Well, he thought, that narrows it down.*

It couldn't be Bolero, and Vriess wasn't in any shape to be lowering himself down. That left Rama.

*He's coming after me.*

Like Simoni needed a fucking nursemaid. He had gotten down the chain just fine, hadn't he? And he had overheard enough of Ripley's conversations to know exactly how to make his way to the control center.

But Ripley didn't like surprises—he had learned that right off the bat. When he showed up all of a sudden, her eyes would pop out of her head, and she wouldn't look kindly on whomever she had left in charge of the *Betty*.

On the other hand, Simoni was a big boy. He knew the risk he was taking. Had they been talking about a fully grown alien, he might have thought twice about entering the dome.

But this one was still a baby, and he knew from the banned histories that babies didn't hunt. They stayed out of the way for the most part, turning nutrients borrowed from their hosts into flesh and bone. So there was no reason for Ripley or anybody else to worry about him.

If Rama caught up with him, Simoni would just tell him to screw himself. He wasn't going back until he got his story.

Still, he found himself watching Rama descend. *Was I that slow?* he asked himself. *And that awkward?*

Simoni was about to start walking again when he saw something so bizarre, so unexpected, that for a moment he didn't believe it was

really happening.

Something shot out of one of the treetops, as if launched by a catapult, and attached itself to Rama's leg. And as the reporter looked on, unable to tear his eyes away, the thing climbed *higher*.

Simoni heard a scream, long and loud and full of terror. *And pain*, he told himself numbly. *Definitely pain*. Then Rama seemed to lose his grip on the chain, and both he and the thing went plummeting through the canopy.

The reporter stood there for a moment, too shocked to move. Then he turned and got his legs going, and accelerated until he was running as fast as he could.

*The damned thing's not supposed to hunt yet*, he insisted, as if that would change anything. As if it would put Rama back on the length of chain, safe and sound. As if it would erase his scream from the slate of Simoni's memory.

*It's not supposed to hunt*, Simoni told himself, through tears of fear. *But damn it to hell, it's hunting*.

That meant Ripley had miscalculated. And if they couldn't depend on her knowledge of the aliens, what in the name of hell could they depend on?

Another scream echoed through the dome, but this one was faint and full of resignation. As if screaming were the only way for Rama to endure what was happening to him.

*Come on*, Simoni thought, urging himself on, *move, goddamit!*

He hoped the alien took its time with Rama, picking his bones clean. Because as soon as it finished, it was coming after Simoni next.

# 14

Shepherd didn't get it.

As he made his way through the flower-dotted jungle, keyed to its subtle shifts of sunlight and shadow, he spared the woman beside him a glance. "Tell me something."

"What is it?" she asked.

"Ripley could have sent your friend the ape man, but she sent you instead—someone who doesn't look like she's ever gotten her hands dirty. Why would she do that?"

Call turned to him, giving him a glimpse of her dark, mysterious eyes. He hadn't seen eyes that intriguing in a long time.

"Johner," she explained, "doesn't play well with others."

"And you do?" It came out a little more mocking than he had intended, but he didn't regret it.

Call looked away again. "When I feel like it."

He had a feeling there was more to it than that. Maybe one day he would find out *what*.

Just then, he caught sight of something shiny up ahead. "There," he said, pointing. "The river."

It was more of a stream, actually—thin, meandering, full of rocks and gnarled roots. And it was one of Benedict's favorite places for a stroll, as evidenced by a path he had worn in one of its grassy, blossom-strewn banks.

But for the moment, all Shepherd could see of the place was something shiny. No bank, no grass, and no Benedict.

Angling off to the side, the safety officer cut a path that would take them to the river that much sooner. It had them trundling through a confusion of ribbed, spade-shaped leaves, and then breasting a cloud of neon insects.

They didn't seem to bother Call. She barely blinked as they flitted in front of her face.

"Funny," she said. "It didn't occur to me that there would be insects here. Or a breeze. Or running water. But it should have."

*All of those things are necessary for the plants to carry out their biological functions.* It was something Philipakos had said when Shepherd first arrived at the Domes. *Worms, bees, you name it. Everything except the pests.*

The tricky part was closing the gaps in the food chain, because they couldn't recreate the damned thing in its entirety. But with a little genetic engineering, they had managed.

Of course, that was when the Domes were someone's pet project, and everyone had oohed and aahed at the idea of them. Now it was impossible to get the colonists something to eat, much less test tube bugs.

Finally, they reached the river. Shepherd looked upstream and down, shading his eyes against the glare of reflected sunlight. He could see the bank where Benedict did some of his best snoozing, but there was no sign of Benedict himself.

It wasn't a reason to panic. Certainly, Call wasn't panicking. Shepherd brushed aside a bead of sweat making its way down the side of his face. *She looks cool as a November morning.*

Or at least, the way his father had described November mornings. Not having set foot on Earth, Shepherd had never experienced one.

"Now what?" asked Call.

"There's another spot," he said, "further upriver." *And a third one in the next dome.* But Shepherd wasn't as confident about either of those places.

*What if we hit them all and we still can't find him?* he asked himself. Not wanting to think about it, he moved on.

\* \* \*

Ripley had memorized the entry code for the colony's backup supply bay before she left the control center. She applied it now, one digit after the other, to the touch-sensitive grid embedded in the bay's metal-alloy doorframe.

And waited.

But after a few seconds, it became clear the doors weren't going to move for her. Ripley tried the sequence again, a little more slowly this time, but achieved the same result.

"What the hell?" said Johner.

He was standing with his back to Ripley, his burner trained on the section of jungle from which they had emerged. However, he could tell from the silence that there weren't any doors sliding.

Ripley frowned and took out her comm unit to contact Krakke. She had already depressed the stud that activated the link and was about to speak when she heard a scraping sound.

Turning, she saw the doors had begun to retract. *Better late than never.* Beyond the threshold was a supply bay, if a small one, with



only a few containers stacked against one if its walls.

“Well,” said Johner, “that’s more like it.”

Ripley went inside, her rifle at the ready. She didn’t expect it would be necessary to fire at anything, considering the door had been locked for the last several weeks—or so Philipakos had said. However, she knew better than to take such things for granted.

She had done that back on the *Nostromo*, when she boarded the emergency evacuation vehicle. It was only later, after the *Nostromo* had exploded and the EEV was under way, that she realized she had company in the form of an alien stowaway.

No way would she be guilty of that error a second time. She checked the bay meticulously from top to bottom before she gave Johner the okay to follow her in.

As soon as he joined her, the door closed behind them, leaving them standing in a bath of cool, dim light. But even then, Ripley didn’t relax.

“Check the status of the control panel,” she said, keeping her burner cradled in her arms.

Johner went over to the bay’s freestanding control panel, laid his rifle down on the floor, and punched in a status check. Instantly, the panel lit up, displaying a series of routine diagnostics.

“Looks good to me,” said Johner, his scarred features thrown into stark relief by the light from the control screen. “But then, what the hell do I know?”

He knew plenty. Ripley had learned that over the years. Johner liked to give the impression he was dumber than stone, but that wasn’t nearly the case.

“Great,” said Ripley. “Let’s get back to the control center and let them know.”

She could have opened a link to Krakke's comm unit and gotten word to the colonists much more quickly. However, she didn't want them to be tempted to meet her halfway. Better to keep them in the dark until she could give them an escort.

Picking up his burner, Johner headed for the door. This time it opened automatically, since they were exiting the supply bay rather than entering it.

As Ripley scanned the slice of jungle framed in the doorway, she found it looked different to her. She tilted her head to the side, trying to figure out why.

Then it came to her. The angle of the light was changing. *Its color too.* After all, they were in orbit around a planet. Eventually the sun had to go down.

Ripley swore to herself. In the dark, the creature would have an even greater advantage. She and Johner had to get a move on while they could still see.

With a last glance at the bay, Ripley followed her companion outside. A moment later the door slid closed again, placing them back in the jungle's embrace.

They were halfway to the flivver when Ripley noticed something. Not the light this time, but a scent. There was no mistaking it, no confusing it with anything else.

Her heart pounding against her ribs, she whispered her discovery to Johner: "It's here."

Her companion stopped dead in his tracks and asked, in the same whispered voice, "Where, goddamnit?"

She didn't know for certain, but she could tell from the fluttering of the leaves which way the breeze was blowing. If they were downwind of it, it had to be ...

"There." She pointed for Johner's benefit.

He nodded. "Gotcha."

They remained where they stood, trying not to move, becoming as much a part of the scenery as possible. And after a minute or so, Ripley caught a glimpse of its profile in the deepening shadows.

The alien was bigger than she had expected, based on the colonists' estimate of how long it had been maturing outside its host. But they could have misremembered.

After all, they had said the embryo was inside their colleague for days, when it couldn't possibly have been that long. So clearly, they were more than a little disoriented.

Ripley held her breath as she watched the alien pick its way through the jungle, following a path that would eventually take it past her. She hadn't seen one of its kind since she left the *Auriga*, where all those she encountered had carried a bit of her genetic material.

This one was different. It was a stranger, a competitor, a threat in every sense. If it attacked her, it wouldn't hesitate to sink its teeth into her brain—by way of her face, if necessary.

Not that she intended to let that happen.

Ever so slowly, she brought her burner up to the level of her chest and tucked its stock into the hollow of her shoulder. As far as she could tell, the alien hadn't noticed.

But it would notice her soon—because contrary to what she had told Philipakos, there were circumstances in which it made sense for them to go on the offensive. This was one of them.

They had the element of surprise. They had the range. And they had the numbers, if only barely. It was as good a shot as they were ever going to get.

Johner had to know it too. *When I make my move*, Ripley thought, *he'll be ready*.

She waited until the alien was almost in front of her before she went into action. Moving as quickly and silently as she could, she slithered through the jungle and placed herself directly in the invader's path.

It took only a second to catch her scent, its elongated head turning that way, and another to begin loping in her direction. Seeing it come, Ripley clenched her teeth and held her ground.

*Another second, she insisted. That way I'll be sure not to miss.*

Then the second was past.

Squeezing the trigger of her burner, she unleashed a burst of high-voltage fury. The alien recoiled from it, but didn't retreat. After all, it could survive a barrage from a single burner—long enough, at least, to get at the one responsible for it.

Which was exactly what it tried to do, pressing forward step by step against the force of the shock rifle, its arms and tail flailing with the punishment it was absorbing. But before it could reach its tormentor, it was attacked from behind.

Looking past the alien, Ripley saw Johner skewering it with an energy bolt of his own, his teeth pulled back in a rictus of determination. Caught in their crossfire, the thing tried to slip free—but it couldn't. They kept it pinned between them, twitching in agony, its tail snapping back and forth like a whip.

*Go down, Ripley insisted.*

For a while, it looked like they might run out of rifle charge first. Then, with a hideously high-pitched scream, it slumped to the dark, root-threaded ground—still writhing, still fighting, but with ever-decreasing intensity.

"Don't stop," Ripley snarled.

Because they didn't want to just incapacitate it. This wasn't a game like the one scientists played, where they would wrap it up

and take it home for study.

And fair play had nothing to do with it. If they killed the alien, they lived. If they gave it a moment's respite, they died. It was that simple, that basic.

Ripley endured the oven-like heat of her energy bolt's thermal backlash. Sweat ran into her eyes, stinging them mercilessly, making it difficult to see. But she didn't dare stop even for a second—not as long as the alien was still jerking about.

And then, all at once, it stopped jerking. And lay there, a solitary plume of greasy black smoke ascending from it. And looked for all the world like a dead thing.

*Which it is,* Ripley thought.

After all, she had alien genes raging inside her. She could tell when one of them had given up the ghost. Taking her finger off her trigger, she lowered her rifle.

But Johner kept firing, bathing the alien in gouts of blue-white electricity. He didn't seem able to stop, caught in a combination of anxiety and fury.

"It's dead," Ripley told him.

He turned to her, red-faced with anger, sweat dripping from his long, scarred chin. "Don't you think I know that?"

They stood there for a moment, eyes locked as if they were going to go at each other next. Then Johner cursed to himself, turned his back and moved off.

Unperturbed, Ripley knelt beside the alien's still-smoking remains. *Strange*, she thought as she examined it. "There's something different about this one."

Johner looked back over his shoulder. "What do you mean?"

Ripley ran her fingers over a ridge that extended from the corpse's shoulder to its elbow. It was something the other aliens—

the ones she had seen before—didn't have.

And its proportions were off. Its head was too big compared to the rest of its body.

"That *is* different," said Johner. "Wonder why."

Ripley nodded. "Me too."

Putting the question aside for a moment, she took out the comm unit in one of her pockets. Then she stabbed in the numbers that made up Call's code and said, "It's Ripley."

*"Did you find the backup bay?"*

"We did," said Ripley. "And it's working. But there's more." She savored the words. "We got the alien."

Silence. Then: *"You're okay, right?"*

"Fine. So's Johner."

*"I didn't ask about Johner,"* Call responded with an antic note in her voice.

Johner's lip curled. "Love you too, little girl."

*"How did you do it?"* asked the android.

Ripley told her.

*"Well,"* said Call, *"that was a stroke of luck. We should see about having some more of those."*

Ripley didn't believe in luck. "See you back at the control center," she said, and put the comm unit away.

Johner considered the alien for a moment. "I forgot how creepy these things are." He glanced at Ripley. "No offense."

She shrugged. "None taken."

\* \* \*

Call smiled to herself, thought *Good going, Ripley*, and returned her comm unit to her pocket. Then she leaned back in her seat.

“Good news?” Shepherd deduced, wiping a bead of sweat from his forehead with the back of his sleeve as he negotiated a path through the jungle.

“The best,” Call confirmed.

She felt as if a weight had been lifted from her brow. Even her surroundings looked different now that she didn’t have to peer into every deepening shadow.

“Ripley and Johner found the alien,” Call elaborated. “They killed it. We’re off the hook.”

Shepherd stopped the flivver and stared at her disbelievingly. “You’re sure?”

Call understood how he felt. Ripley had told the colonists they didn’t stand a chance of killing the thing. And then, somehow, she had done it anyway.

“Would I lie to you?” she asked. “The sucker’s dead.”

Shepherd regarded her a little longer, then looked away. “So we don’t have to leave the Domes after all.”

“I guess not,” Call said.

“We should tell the others.”

“Ripley will take care of that,” she assured him. “She’s on her way back to the control center right now.”

“That’ll do, I guess.” Shepherd shook his head, looking strangely disoriented. “It’s crazy. I got so keyed up about the alien, I was ready for anything—except this.”

“Finding out there’s nothing more to worry about.”

“That’s right.”

“Not so crazy. I’ve felt that way myself.”

It was one of the reasons she found it difficult to adjust to life on Earth. Every so often, she would tense up in anticipation of an attack that never came.

Johner and Vriess experienced the same thing, so it wasn't just an android issue. They had beaten all the aliens on the *Auriga*, destroying every last one of them. But in their minds, they would never stop fighting them.

*Ever.*

"We still have to find Benedict," Shepherd noted. "At least, *I* do."

"Hey," said Call, "I've come this far. I might as well see this through to the end."

Shepherd seemed pleased by her decision. Putting the flivver into drive again, he continued along the bank of the river.

After a while, he said, "There's something else I don't get. I mean, besides the reason Ripley sent you out here."

"I'm listening," said Call.

"At heart, you're not a cargo hauler. You're better than that. So what are you doing with Ripley and those others?"

She chuckled. "I'm a lot more like them than you think."

Shepherd shook his head. "Not from what I see. And I'm usually a good judge of character."

"Okay," she said, indulging him—and herself at the same time. "So what am I *really* like?"

He gave her a sidelong glance. "You're bright. Educated. Cultured. You can tell Merlot from Pinot Grigio. But you downplay it so you can fit in with your friends."

Call resisted an impulse to smile. *He's not far off, is he?* Except it wasn't intelligence, it was programming. And it wasn't education, it was memory.

"I've never had Pinot Grigio in my life," she said, sidestepping Shepherd's observation. "And as far as—"

She stopped in mid-sentence, catching a glimpse of something up ahead alongside the stream. Putting a hand on her companion's arm,



she said, "Stop."

"What is it?" he asked.

*Something I can see but you can't, because I was designed with superior eyesight along with all that intelligence.* "Brace yourself."

Shepherd stopped the flivver and looked around. "Benedict?"

"I think so," she said, and pointed. "Over there. In those bushes with the yellow blossoms."

Getting out of the flivver, they approached a tattered wet jumpsuit that had been blue once but was now a darker color. There wasn't much left inside it, but what there was looked enough like a man to satisfy them it was Benedict.

"Damn," Shepherd said, his voice thick with emotion.

"I'm sorry," said Call.

His Adam's apple climbed his throat. "It's not going to be easy telling Phil. He and Benedict were friends for a long time."

"Come on," she told Shepherd, putting her hand on his shoulder. "I'll help you get him into the flivver."

He nodded. "Thanks."

Fortunately, there was a stack of plastic bags in the back of the vehicle, no doubt intended for dead branches and such. They would serve a different purpose this time.

It was gruesome work stuffing the pieces into the bags, but they got through it. Afterward, when Benedict's remains were lashed securely in the back of the flivver, Shepherd went to wash his bloody hands in the stream, and Call followed him.

"That was bad," she said.

"You can say that again."

She was going to say something comforting, something to distract her companion from his loss. But she never got to it.

Androids weren't supposed to have instincts—not even the enhanced androids of Call's generation. But it was something like an instinct that made her turn her head suddenly and scrutinize the swathe of jungle to her left.

At first, she didn't see anything—just leaves moving in the warm, humid breeze. Then she *did* see something— only a glimpse, but it was enough. Nothing else looked that way, moved that way.

"Call," Shepherd whispered, for he had turned his head as well.

"I know," she said, "I see it too."

It was the alien. And it was coming for them.

*Shit, Ripley. You said you killed it.* And she wasn't one to make careless mistakes.

But there it was, sliding through the undergrowth. So there had to be more than one of them.

*How?* she wondered. The colonists had mentioned only one ovoid—and only one of them dying as he gave birth. So someone had been wrong, or maybe lied to cover something up.

Later, the android vowed, she would get some answers. But for the moment, she was interested only in survival— hers and Shepherd's.

Getting up at the same time he did, she headed for the flivver, where the weapons were. Fortunately, they got there before the alien could slink completely out of concealment.

Without taking her eyes off it, she grabbed her shock rifle. Then she said, "Start the flivver."

Shepherd hefted his own weapon. "Not a chance."

"Don't give me that macho bullshit. You're the one who knows how to drive this thing, you idiot."

Shepherd didn't give in—not verbally, at least. But he did get into the flivver and start it up.

The alien chose that moment to emerge from the foliage, its jaws dripping thick strands of saliva. It wasn't a species inclined toward sneak attacks. When it went into action, it did so boldly and unremittingly.

But as Call took in the sight of the creature in the fading light, she saw there was something different about it. Something she hadn't seen before.

Its back and limbs were covered by a partial exoskeleton, which was as blue-black as the rest of it. And its head was decidedly larger than Call had expected, with a subtle filigree running from its jaw to its rear extremity.

*What the hell ... ?* she thought.

Not that it mattered what the thing looked like. It was still a stone-cold killer, and at the moment they were the soft, slow prey it meant to kill.

"Get in," Shepherd breathed.

Call was hampered by the need to keep her burner trained on the alien, but she managed to fall into the back of the flivver alongside what was left of Benedict, her legs hanging out.

"Go!" she rasped.

A moment later, the flivver leaped forward. Unfortunately, as Shepherd had explained on the way there, it wasn't built for speed—and the alien was.

Seeing them take off, it began loping after them. As soon as it began to catch up, Call depressed her trigger and unleashed a bolt of blue-white energy.

It frazzled the alien, made it scream and stop dead in its tracks. But a moment later it was back on their trail, working even harder to reach the flivver and its contents.

A second time it made a bid to catch them. And a second time Call seared it, eliciting a paroxysm of pain and fury.

It was starting to pursue them again when she noticed the flivver was losing speed. "Why the hell are we stopping?" she demanded, her voice sounding shrill and frantic in her ears.

"We're not stopping," Shepherd called back to her. "We're coming to the door. It won't open that fast."

*The door, Call echoed to herself. This'll be tricky.*

They couldn't let the alien follow them into the next dome. But the portals were set to accommodate whoever approached them, and to stay open as long as there was something in range of their sensors.

With shocking quickness, the alien closed the gap. Clenching her teeth, Call speared it with another burst of energy. But this time, the flivver hit a bump in the terrain and spoiled her aim, and the thing was allowed to continue unimpeded.

*Crap, she thought.*

Before she could take aim again, the alien reached out with a long, black claw and grabbed hold of her ankle. It was as if a metal-alloy vice had closed on it.

Tamping down her fear and revulsion, the android turned her burner on the thing's dripping, double-rowed maw and unleashed a blast at close range.

The alien shot backward, flipping head over heels, and receded into the distance. But Call had no illusions that she had killed it. It would be back, and with a vengeance.

Darting a glance over her shoulder, she saw that the hatch that gave access to the next dome was looming just a few meters ahead of them. As she watched, its doors began to slide aside.

Shepherd slowed the flivver a little more, trying to time it so they wouldn't hit the aperture before it was wide enough. As it

happened, the flivver grazed the door on the right side as they went by.

Then they were inside the hatchway, and the doors were beginning to slide closed again. But beyond the opening, Call could see the alien plunging toward them, insane with frustration, refusing to stop until it sank its teeth into its prey.

It was a race—and the doors won. Just as the alien reached them, visible only through the narrowest of gaps, the metal slabs closed the rest of the way.

But Call and her companion were far from safe. The slabs would part again as soon as the sensors in the doorframe conveyed the invader's presence there.

Call frowned, needing to prevent that.

Given enough time, she could have plugged into the system and made the hatch do what she wanted. But there *was* no time. She had to improvise or wind up like Benedict.

Finding the node that governed the door controls—an unassuming square box at chest height protruding a few centimeters from the wall—Call leveled her rifle at it and squeezed off a burst. As it hit the node, it started a storm of tiny lightnings.

*Enough to blow the circuit.* At least, that was her hope.

As the flivver ran the length of the hatchway, the doors up ahead began to make way for them. But the ones behind them were the key. Call glared at them, insisting they remain closed.

And they did.

But not without opposition to the idea. The hatchway filled with a cacophonous pounding, making it sound as if someone were beating on a giant drum, and for a moment Call had to wonder if the centimeters-thick barriers would hold.

As they came to the end of the hatchway, the alien still hadn't gotten access to it. *We're okay*, Call thought, a wave of relief washing over her.

But they wouldn't be *okay* forever.

The alien would turn around and make its way back through the domes. And the colonists would have no way of knowing where it was when they set out for the backup bay.

*Ripley won't be happy*, Call thought.

"You all right?" Shepherd shot back at her as they left the hatchway behind and cut through a pine forest.

"Just drive," she said, taking out her comm unit and trying to ignore the lumpy plastic bag beside her.

# 15

Angie scanned the red-on-black graphic stretched across her computer screen. "Is this it?"

"It is," said her father with a note of triumph in his voice.

They had spent the last twenty minutes poring through the dozens of programs they had discarded over the years. Some were earlier incarnations of software they still employed. Some had outlived their usefulness. And some had *never* been useful.

This particular system hadn't been used for twenty years. But with luck, Angie would resurrect it.

"You've got it?" asked Seigo.

Angie looked back over her shoulder at him, enduring the sour milk smell of his breath. "Looks like it."

"That's good," said Cody. "Now we need to see if we can establish contact with the remote sensors."

That was the trick, all right. And they hadn't been maintained in a couple of decades. For all Angie knew, not a single one of them would respond.

Her dad had set up the heat-sensing system before she was old enough to know what it was. In those days he was inordinately

concerned with fires, since her mother had died in one—albeit in a mining colony a star system away.

Then, experience showing him how unlikely it was that a fire would start in the Domes, Philipakos's concern waned—and the system fell into disuse. *Until now.*

Because it was sensitive enough to detect more than combustion. It could track the heat given off by a living creature—in this case, the one that had gestated inside Pandor.

Somewhere, it was lying in wait for them. Knowing *where* would do a lot to maximize their chances of survival.

*Come on,* Angie thought, asking the remote sensors to let her know they were still operative.

Suddenly, red dots began to pop up on her screen. And they kept on popping up, each one representing a different sensor in a different dome. She smiled to herself.

"I can't believe it," said her father.

Neither could Angie. *But the screen doesn't lie.* Every last sensor was reporting in, demonstrating its functionality.

"Now let's see where the damned thing is," said her father, referring to the alien.

Angie polled the system's readings from one end of the Domes to the other, looking for the blue, flame-shaped icon that would indicate a telltale concentration of thermal energy. But as the data came in, she didn't see what she thought she would see.

Philipakos swore under his breath.

"What is it?" Gogolac asked.

*It can't be right,* Angie insisted, her stomach tightening into a hard, painful knot. And yet, the system seemed to be functioning perfectly.

"Well?" Seigo prompted.



It was Angie who answered him. "Ripley said we had to worry about an alien. *One*. But according to this system, it's *not* one. There's a whole pack of them."

Seigo pushed past her and looked at the monitor screen, where there were so many blue flames in evidence that they were crowding each other. And only four of them could be chalked up to Shepherd, Call, Ripley and Johner.

"For chrissakes," Seigo said, looking back over his shoulder at his colleagues, "the bastards are *everywhere*."

"In fact," said Angie, "there's an even dozen of them, scattered pretty much throughout the Domes." So no matter where the colonists went, they were likely to encounter one of them.

"Wait a minute," said Gogolac. She turned to Cody and then Hendricks. "You were there when Pandor died. Why didn't you tell us there were so many of them?"

Cody frowned. "Hendricks was sick in the bushes. I went to make sure she was all right." He shrugged. "There could have been more, I guess. I just didn't see them."

"Ripley told us she knew them," said Hendricks, her voice small and threaded with pain. "She said she had run into them before. Why didn't she tell us there would be more than one?"

Angie shook her head, at a loss for an explanation. "I don't know. Maybe Ripley doesn't know them as well as she thinks she does."

\* \* \*

As Ripley entered the control center with Johner in tow, she saw a heightened fear in the faces of the colonists. But then, she had thrown them a curve, telling them there was only one alien to worry about.

And as it turned out, there was a second one.

Call turned to Ripley, frustration in her synthetic eyes. No doubt, she had been doing her best to calm the rising tide of panic.

Then Ripley saw it wasn't just frustration in Call. It was something else as well. *Something happened while I was gone.*

"We've got a bigger problem than we thought," Call told her.

"Damned right we have," snapped the man with the sharp features. He pointed at Ripley. "You people *really* haven't been of much help."

"They don't have to help at *all*," Philipakos said, before Ripley or any of her people could say it. "So let's stay calm and figure this out."

"Figure *what* out?" Ripley asked.

The woman who looked like a little girl came forward. For the first time, Ripley saw the resemblance between Philipakos and what must have been his daughter.

"Pandor didn't give birth to one alien, or even two," the woman said in her childlike voice. "He gave birth to a whole litter." She jerked a thumb over her shoulder. "I've located them with the help of a heat-sensing system—all twelve of them."

Call nodded. "I checked out the reading. It's accurate."

Ripley shook her head, reflexively rejecting the notion. "It doesn't work that way."

*Then where*, she asked herself, *did the second one come from?* She had been plaguing herself with that question since Call alerted her to the thing's existence.

The obvious answer was that there had been a second egg and a second host. But there were only a handful of people living in the Domes. It seemed unlikely that someone else could have given birth without the others knowing about it.

"Give me a better explanation," said Philipakos's daughter.

*Multiple births ... ?*

It was outside Ripley's realm of experience. Kane had given life to a single alien. So had Purvis, the nickel miner on the Auriga. So had Ripley herself.

It had never occurred to her that multiple births were possible. But with the help of Wren and the Auriga's other scientists, Ripley's "daughter" had delivered a live hybrid, bypassing the need for an egg and the facehugger that came with it.

*Who am I to say what's possible and what's not?*

What's more, it fit with the anatomy of the alien she had encountered. *A different kind of gestation, a different kind of delivery, a different kind of alien.*

"It's another breed," Ripley responded—a little lamely, she thought.

But where had it come from? And why hadn't she ever been made aware of it, in all her dealings with Weyland-Yutani, the military, and the aliens themselves?

Ripley burned to find out. But for now, she had to focus on getting them out of there.

"I won't lie to you," she told the colonists. "The number of aliens out there is going to have an impact on our chances of survival. But we've established that the backup bay is functioning. If we can get to it, my people will get us out of here."

"What are you suggesting?" asked the sandy-haired woman. "That we try to make it across the colony with all those monsters out there?"

"Have we got a choice?" asked Shepherd.

"Not as far as I can tell," said Philipakos.

Ripley nodded. "Let's go, then."

"Now?" asked the man with the sharp features.

“Now,” Ripley told him. She glanced at an observation port, which showed her the diminishing sunlight in one of the domes. “Before it gets any darker.”

\* \* \*

*This can't be happening*, Simoni thought, his breath coming in weary, ragged gasps. *It can't.*

Had he known the developing alien wandering the Domes was advanced enough to attack Rama that way, he would never have followed Ripley down in the first place. He would have stayed where he was like a good boy and waited till she came back.

But even after Simoni saw what happened to Rama, he had still believed he would survive. All he had to do was beat the alien to the control center. And it wouldn't even *start* to come after him until it was done picking Rama apart.

For the umpteenth time, the reporter found himself picturing Rama's death. There was lots of blood, no doubt. And screams, dulled by the surrounding foliage. And the soft, sucking sound of Rama's insides being dragged out of him.

*No*, Simoni thought, forcing the image away again. *I can't think about that.*

After all, the situation had changed. It was no longer just a matter of reaching the control center ahead of the alien—because a little while earlier, as Simoni approached the place, he saw *another* alien up ahead of him.

It was dark and slick-looking, just like the one that had sunk its teeth into Rama. And it was as big as the full-grown alien in Morse's forbidden book.

As Simoni doubled back to avoid it, his heart pounding so hard he could barely breathe, he found himself thinking it wasn't fair. He

wasn't supposed to be in any danger.

There was only supposed to have been one alien. *One, goddamit.* And it wasn't supposed to have been mature enough to pose a threat.

Now, having had some time to absorb the reality of his plight, he found he could deal with it a little better. His heart was still beating too hard and his clothes were rank with sweat, but he had put some distance between himself and the second alien.

For the moment, at least, he was all right. He was alive and—as far as he could tell—alone.

At the moment, Simoni's biggest problem was that he didn't know where he was going. In his panic, he had gotten turned around and lost sight of the *Betty*, and now he didn't know how to find the dome she was hovering over.

He didn't know how to get to the control center either, even if there hadn't been an alien standing in its way. *Shit*, he thought, suppressing a surge of panic, *I don't know anything.*

All he could do was keep moving, and hope he came in sight of the cargo vessel before the aliens came in sight of *him*. It was his only chance to keep on living.

And it wasn't a *bad* chance, Simoni kept telling himself. The domes were only so big, and there were only so many of them. Eventually the *Betty* had to show herself, and when she did he would be in good shape again.

Unfortunately, he wasn't likely to get a very good reception on his return to the ship. Vriess and Bolero had been fond of Rama. They wouldn't be happy to learn he had perished because he'd had to follow the reporter down.

*Then they don't have to know*, he thought.

It was the obvious answer. And Simoni had gotten good at lying, honing the skill in his pursuit of Ripley from border station to border station—good enough to talk his way out of anything, in even the crudest company.

He would handle Vriess and Bolero just fine. And when Ripley and the others came back, he would handle them too.

Simoni was still thinking about it when he heard something crack in the jungle behind him. *A twig?* he wondered, feeling something cold trickle down his spine. *What would make a twig snap in a place like this?*

*Oh my god,* he thought, and started pelting through the jungle in the opposite direction. But he could hear something hastening after him, making a hissing sound as it brushed against the leaves, gaining on him with every thunderous beat of his heart.

Suddenly, lying to Vriess was the least of Simoni's worries.

\* \* \*

Philipakos felt a pang as Shepherd guided their flivver through the dense foliage of the African rainforest, leaving the security of the control center behind.

Glancing back over his shoulder, he saw Cody at the wheel of the other flivver. Cody wasn't the driver Shepherd was, but he was doing an admirable job of keeping up.

And Ripley? She was ensconced in the seat beside Cody, her hair blowing back, her shock rifle cradled in her arms. It made Philipakos feel good knowing she was there.

*Funny, isn't it?* Not so long ago he had suspected the woman's motives, refused to open his station to her. Now he was willing to place his life in her hands.

He corrected himself: *Not just willing. Eager.*

Her crew seemed to feel the same way. It was as if she were more than human to them, more than flesh and blood. But that was the persona some people projected.

They took on burdens others wouldn't, faced problems others couldn't. And because of that, they commanded respect.

Philipakos wasn't so different from Ripley in that regard. For decades he had shouldered the responsibility of running the colony, kept his people safe and productive.

But truth be told, he hadn't fought alien monsters, nor did he have any desire to do so. That sort of responsibility he was only too happy to leave to Ripley.

He just hoped that when it was over, when his people and Ripley's had escaped the colony, there was a way to rid it of the aliens that had infested it. He wasn't sure he could convince Earthgov to spend the requisite funds, but he would give it his best shot.

Philipakos had said he wouldn't sacrifice a person for the hundred thousand square meters of rare plants encapsulated in the domes, and he had been right to say so. But he still loved the aspens and the palmettos and the cinnamon trees, and he wasn't going to let them go without a fight.

*First things first*, he reflected. They had to reach the back-up bay before they could start making plans.

Looking up at the curvature of the dome above them, Philipakos estimated they were more than halfway to the hatch and on the most direct route possible. So far, so good. And they hadn't seen a sign of the aliens.

But then, his daughter's thermal scan hadn't shown any of them in this dome or the next one. If the flivvers were going to encounter opposition, it would likely be in Dome Three—or later.

Not that the aliens weren't capable of moving around. According to Ripley, they could be like lightning when they wished.

As he thought that, Shepherd pulled their flivver hard to the right, whipping his passengers in the opposite direction. Surprised, Philipakos turned to him.

"The hatch is up ahead, Shep."

"I know," the safety officer told him. "But this way is better."

Philipakos was going to object until he saw the way Shepherd had taken them gave them more clearance on either side of the vehicle. The dearth of branches whipping at them translated immediately into more speed, which was after all what they needed.

"I see what you mean," the administrator said.

"Thought you would," Shepherd responded without looking at him.

Philipakos bit his lip. *You're an idiot sometimes*, he told himself. Walking the domes was one thing. Patrolling them in a flivver, day in and day out, was quite another.

For what seemed like a long time, they slashed through the jungle, passing tamarinds and cola nuts and oil palms in the gently fading sunlight. Finally, through the redflowered branches of an African tulip tree, Philipakos spied the hatch that led to the next dome.

He nodded. "Good going, Shep."

"We're not out of the woods yet," said Shepherd.

Philipakos was about to contend otherwise when something insanely big and dark lurched across their path. He heard a cry of warning and Shepherd swerved to the right, but it was too late.

The flivver hit the thing and ran up its side, dumping its human cargo. Philipakos braced himself for a potentially lethal impact, but



it wasn't nearly as bad as he thought— not much worse, in fact, than falling out of bed.

Scrambling to his feet, he tried to get his bearings. But he was jostled by first one colleague and then another as they tried to save themselves, and it stole his sense of direction.

The thing that had collided with the flivver was hurt, apparently—but not fatally, because it was in the process of freeing itself from the weight of the vehicle. And as if that wasn't bad enough, Philipakos saw another shadowy giant shambling in their direction along the path behind them.

Frantically, he looked for his daughter, but there was no sign of her. Then he realized with a pang of desperation that she was still in the flivver, trying to get out before it turned over and crushed the life out of her.

“Angie!” Philipakos bellowed.

Only barely did she manage to leap free of the flivver before it rose to its full height and came crashing down on its back. But by then, she and her father had worse things to worry about.

*Infinitely* worse.

Because the creature into which the vehicle had crashed was slowly but surely crawling over it to get at Angie. Philipakos grabbed her by her arm and pulled her away from the thing.

But before he could get very far, someone careened into him—knocking him backwards into a tree trunk, where he realized he had lost his grip on his daughter. And as he tried to get her back, the other creature came between them.

This one wasn't injured or dazed. It was quick, alert, coiled to strike—and Angie was the fleeing piece of meat that seemed to have caught its attention.

No, Philipakos thought, already feeling his world hollowed out by his daughter's loss.

But before the thing could reach her, it was skewered on a bolt of seething, pale-blue energy. Twitching in its grasp, the alien was forced back.

"The hatch!" roared Ripley, who was responsible for the barrage. She was standing up in the shotgun seat of the second flivver, her face bent over her rifle. "Get to the hatch!"

Philipakos wanted very much to follow her advice. However, his daughter was running in the opposite direction.

"Angie!" he yelled after her, hoping to stop her in her tracks.

But she didn't seem to hear him. She kept running, no doubt in the belief that an alien was right behind her. And a moment later she vanished into the embrace of the forest.

Philipakos cursed to himself as he lowered his head and plunged in after her.

\* \* \*

Ripley's decision was made for her when she saw the colonists scatter into the depths of the jungle.

"Go!" she growled at Cody. Then she leaped from the flivver, rolled, and came up running with her burner in her hands.

Call and Johner would know what she wanted—for them to deposit Cody and Gogolac in the backup bay, if they could. Only then, when those two were safe, would Ripley approve of her comrades' coming back.

Unfortunately, she wasn't confident there would be anything left for them to find.

The aliens had an uncanny instinct for knowing where the meat was—and as soon as they realized how much of it was in that dome,

they would converge on the place. In minutes, all twelve of them would be stalking human prey, ravening for human flesh.

As big as they were—for reasons Ripley didn't have time to think about—it would be difficult to deny them what they wanted. Some might say impossible.

But Ripley was damned well going to try.

\* \* \*

"Angie!" Philipakos bellowed, aware that he might be attracting the attention of the aliens. "Angie, stop!"

Just then, he caught a glimpse of her. She wasn't that far ahead but there was a lot of dense, dark jungle between them.

"Angie!" he roared, determined that she hear him.

And she did. He could see her turn and peer through a thicket of branches at him, wide-eyed with fear.

"Angie," he said, tearing through the intervening foliage, "it's all right. I'm coming."

Then Philipakos was there with her, his arms around her, whispering reassurances in which he hadn't the least bit of confidence. He could feel his daughter trembling, her tiny frame feeling smaller than ever before.

"I thought it was going to get me," she said, a catch in her voice though it was clear she was trying to regain control of herself. "Ripley was right. They're monsters."

"Hush," said Philipakos. "We'll be all right. All we've got to do is find the—"

Before he could finish, something emerged from the jungle behind Angie. It was big, black, and vaguely insectoid in its posture. As it moved, it used its claws like forepaws, enabling it to pick its way more efficiently.

It had no eyes that Philipakos could see. But it had a maw full of razor-sharp teeth.

"Dad ... ?" said Angie, looking into his eyes.

Then she whirled and saw the alien. A gasp escaped her, but she didn't run this time. She just stood there, her hand finding its way into her father's.

He enclosed it in his own, letting her know he was with her. But really, it was a futile gesture and he knew it.

The alien advanced on them slowly, slaver dripping from its jaws, as if it didn't want to reach them too quickly. As if it wanted to savor its kill to the fullest extent possible.

And truthfully, there was no need for it to hurry. It was a killing machine and it was facing the two most helpless victims it could have found anywhere in the Domes.

It wasn't that Philipakos minded dying so much. He had lived the life he wanted. He had no complaints to speak of, no regrets.

But he couldn't contemplate the idea of the monster taking Angie. She was his little girl, his baby. If she died, it would be as if the universe had shut down.

Philipakos had to keep that from happening, no matter what it took. But he didn't know if he had it in him. He was just an old man, and a fat old man at that.

And that was what made his heart pound so hard.

"Go," he told his daughter.

"Dad!" she moaned.

"*Run!*" he bellowed.

And Angie ran.

Philipakos wished he could be assured of her safety. He could rest easy knowing she had survived, no matter what else happened.

But he doubted he would live long enough to find out.

# 16

Shepherd hadn't panicked like the others.

He hadn't expected the aliens to overturn their flivver, or to be so damned big, or to send him flying into a tree trunk that would knock the wind out of him. But battered as he was, he had kept his cool. He found a spot that offered him concealment from all directions and waited until he could breathe again, then went looking for the others.

After all, he was the safety officer. He had to help them if he could.

The first one he found was Hendricks. The way she was crashing through the jungle, she wasn't hard to spot. Putting himself on an intercept course, he quickly and quietly took her down.

She only struggled for a moment. Then she realized who and what he was, and she went limp.

"Oh god," she moaned, tears streaming as she covered her mouth with both hands. "Oh my god ... "

"Quiet," he whispered in her ear. "*Now.*"

Hendricks drew one long, tremulous breath and fell silent. Satisfied that she wouldn't give them away, he wiped sweat from his

brow with the back of his hand.

"All right," Shepherd said softly, looking around for signs of the aliens. "We're going to be fine. We just have to keep our wits about us. Ripley and her people have survived encounters with these life-forms. We can too."

Hendricks sniffed back a thread of snot. "We're not them. We're just flower farmers."

"But we've got the benefit of their experience. All we have to do is get back to the control center. Then we can regroup and go at this another way."

"Whatever you say." But she couldn't stop the fear from welling in her eyes.

Shepherd hunkered down in front of her. "I swear to God, we're going to make it. You believe me?"

Hendricks knuckled away a tear.

"Do you *believe* me?" he demanded.

She nodded.

"Good," he said. He extended his hand. "Now get to your feet. We've got some walking to do."

\* \* \*

Seigo had run as hard as he could. He had done so blindly, uncaring as to direction, unable to stop lest the aliens grab him and rip his limbs off.

Because that was what he pictured them doing. And regardless of how he tried to put the image from his mind, it lingered with him, eating him from the inside.

But now Seigo found he couldn't run anymore. His chest felt as if there were a weight pressing against it, and the muscles in his legs burned as if they were on fire.

Finally, he dared to stop and look behind him. And what he saw made his heart leap with hope.

Apparently, he had traveled in a big bloody circle, because there was the overturned flivver. And from what he could tell, it was still in drivable condition.

All the botanist had to do was flip the thing right side up again. Forcing himself to run to it, he put his shoulder against its side panel and pushed.

The flivver rocked as if it would turn over, but at the last second it fell back into its original position. *It's too heavy*, he thought, gasping for breath.

But the alternative was to remain on foot, and he knew that could only end badly. So he placed his shoulder against the flivver and heaved a second time.

Again, it teetered on the edge of turning over. But Seigo was determined not to let it stop there. With a groan from deep within, he dug hard with his tired, trembling legs— and just got the flivver over the hump.

Squealing in protest, it hit the ground and bounced once, its shock absorbers doing their job. Then it sat there, inviting him to get inside.

But it still had to start. If not, Seigo had spent the last of his strength for nothing. Dragging himself into the driver's seat, he pressed the start button.

The engine whined, clearly compromised by the punishment it had taken. In the distance, there was another sound—equally high-pitched. But it wasn't an echo.

*Come on*, Seigo thought, his insides turning to jelly. *I've got no goddamned time for this.*

Suddenly, the engine turned over. With a deep-seated sigh of relief, Seigo put the flivver into gear, turned the wheel, and headed for the hatch, which—now that he looked at it—was even closer than he remembered.

*I've got a chance*, he thought. All he had to do was get to the backup bay and let the cargo haulers lift him out, and then he could put this nightmare behind him.

But before he could get to the hatch, he saw something dark and lizard-like move to intercept him. And at the rate it was going, it would reach him before he got to the exit.

*Shit!* he thought.

With no other choice, he hauled the wheel to the left, spinning the flivver around. Then he gunned the engine and headed in the opposite direction.

His mind racing, he thought, *I'll lose it in the jungle. Then I'll double back and go for the hatch again.*

It seemed like a reasonable plan. But when he looked back, he saw the alien wasn't giving up on him. It was still on his tail, loping after him through the brush.

Not even running. Just loping, like it had all the time in the world. Like it was only a matter of time before it got what it wanted.

*Damn*, Seigo thought, his heart racing so fast he thought it would burst, *I don't want to die.*

Out of panic, he pressed down on the power pedal to coax more speed out of the flivver—knowing it would also cut down on its running time. But if the alien caught up to him, it wouldn't matter how long the damned thing kept running.

Its engine whining, the vehicle accelerated—and gradually, the gap between hunter and prey began to widen. The alien was losing the race. Fast as it was, it couldn't keep up.



*My god, Seigo thought, I'm going to make it.*

Then he turned to look forward again and saw the tree trunk looming in front of him, hurtling at him much too fast for him to miss. He ripped the steering wheel to the right, but it was too late. With a jolt, the flivver hit the tree and sent Seigo flying through the air.

Clenched like a fist, he braced himself for the bone-cracking impact that seemed sure to follow. But it never happened. Instead, he hit the ground a glancing blow and rolled a few times, ending up in a patch of bright yellow flowers.

*I'm alive,* he thought, hardly able to believe it.

Then he remembered the alien. Had it given up? Or was it still coming after him, eating ground with each stride, ravening for the meat he had thus far denied it?

Too frightened to look back, he started running through the jungle. But he couldn't make his legs pump the way he wanted them to, the way he needed them to. They were shaking too badly, his fear and his rough landing taking their toll.

*I've got to move,* he thought.

At the same time, he heard something—a rustling in the jungle behind him. It could have been the wind caressing the leaves. But in his heart, Seigo knew it was more than that.

His insides liquefied. *No,* he thought. *Please God, no ...*

Then his legs gave out altogether, spilling him onto the dark, wet ground. He tried to get up, to gather his feet beneath him, but it was no use. All the fight had gone out of him.

For what seemed like a long time, Seigo sat there whimpering. Tears rolled down his cheeks, stinging his flesh, as he waited for the end like a mouse beneath a cat's paw.

But nothing happened. And the longer he went on breathing, the more he began to wonder why.

Finally, the botanist found the strength to look back, to try to catch a glimpse of what was behind him. But it wasn't the alien he saw there, standing half in shadow. It was Rex, his tongue hanging out, his breath coming hard as if he had been doing some running.

*The dog, Seigo thought giddily. Just the goddamned dog.*

Then he realized there was something looming *behind* it ...

\* \* \*

Hendricks stopped alongside Shepherd, beside a spreading, blue-blossomed jacaranda, and eyed the hatch that led to the control center.

It was less than fifty meters away, framed by stands of bamboo. *Barely a sprint*, she thought. But it would take a few seconds for the hatch to open for them, and while it did, she and Shepherd would be out in the open.

Unfortunately, they had no alternative.

Shepherd turned to her, beads of sweat standing out on his forehead, and jerked his thumb in the direction of the hatch. Hendricks nodded, indicating she was as ready as she would ever be.

But before they could make their dash, her companion's brow furrowed and he scanned the jungle around them. "Did you hear something?" he whispered.

Hendricks listened. *Nothing*. Not even the hiss of leaves moving in the breeze. "I don't think so."

Then she *did* hear it—a rustling somewhere above them, too distinct to be denied. Her heart leaped into her mouth, threatening to choke her.

As Shepherd slowly tilted his head back and looked up, she thought, *Maybe I'm wrong. Please let me be wrong.*

Shepherd grimaced. "Shit."

Somehow finding the mettle to follow his gaze, Hendricks saw a silhouette stretched across the branches above them—something angular and vaguely insectoid-looking—and her insides turned to icewater.

Shepherd's Adam's apple climbed his throat and descended again, and his weapon shifted subtly in his hands. "Get out of here," he told her.

Hendricks felt her throat start to close, cutting off her breath. "I can't," she mewled.

Because if she just stood there, there was a chance the thing would go away. But if she ran, the nightmare would start all over again.

Shepherd turned to her, his eyes round with single-minded intensity. "Do it!" he rasped.

With a little cry of fear, Hendricks ran.

\* \* \*

Moving through the gathering twilight, Angie wished like hell she hadn't left her father's side. The knowledge that she had abandoned him, leaving him to face the alien alone, hurt worse than the fire in her throat.

But she could find it in herself to ignore the pain because she knew it wouldn't last long. Without a plan or a direction, she would soon be food for the aliens herself.

As she thought that, she heard something—a movement among the leaves. But she couldn't tell what direction it was coming from.

Turning around slowly, she peered into darkness and thicker darkness, alert for even the slightest sign of trouble. Just as she was

starting to doubt there had been anything in the first place, something grabbed her arm.

Angie looked up at it, her heart sinking in her chest— knowing with full certainty that she was looking at her death.

But it wasn't an alien she found herself gaping at. It was Ripley.

"Christ," she sighed, her heart hammering so hard it seemed it would break a rib.

"Let's go," Ripley whispered.

"Go where?"

"To Dome Seven—where the *Betty* is. We don't have the luxury of using the backup bay anymore."

Angie had to concede it was their best option, though she didn't know if she could climb the chain. But as she looked into her savior's hard, dark eyes, she had something more urgent on her mind.

"I left my father back near the flivver. He may still be—"

"Alive?" said Ripley, making it sound absurd. "Not any more."

"Why not?"

Ripley looked around warily. "Too much time's gone by. Forget him."

"He's my *father*, goddamnit."

"*Was* your father. Unless you want to wind up the way he has, I suggest we move on."

For a moment, Angie was on the verge of insisting. But in the end, she stopped himself.

"Good," said Ripley. "Now let's go."

She started through the jungle, leaving it to Angie to follow. Her strides were such that the botanist found it difficult to keep up, but she managed.

Until she heard another sound—something halfway between a song and a sigh. *The murmur of a stream, maybe?* She didn't think so.

“Did you hear that?” she asked her companion.

Ripley didn’t say anything in response. However, she stopped and began looking around again.

Angie too searched her surroundings, hoping not to see the gleam of dying light on alien flesh. As it turned out, she couldn’t discern *anything*. And for a moment, she couldn’t hear anything either—except, of course, the wind rustling the trees. Then the wind died down for a moment.

And she heard someone say, “Help me ... ”

The plea was faint, but there was no mistaking the words or the desperation behind them. *Someone’s out there.*

She couldn’t tell who it was. Or where they were. Turning to Ripley, she said, “Someone’s calling for help.”

“Yes,” said Ripley, her nostrils flaring. Then she pointed with her shock rifle. “That way.”

Angie didn’t see anything in that direction, but she trusted her companion’s senses. “What are we waiting for?”

Ripley glanced at her. Then, silent and powerful as a hunting lioness, she moved forward.

As before, Angie stayed close to her—and not just for safety. She wanted to find the person who had called for help.

*Dad?* she couldn’t help thinking.

She had all but seen him die, and Ripley had said there wasn’t any hope for him. But until Angie saw the evidence with her own eyes, she couldn’t rule out the possibility that he had survived.

*I’m coming, she thought. Please let it be you.*

Abruptly, Ripley stopped and looked around, as if she had lost the scent. Then she seemed to get it back and went forward again, taking Angie through a part of the jungle so dense it seemed there was no air to breathe.

On her own, the botanist wouldn't have been able to get through it. But Ripley broke the trail ahead of her, making it possible.

Finally, they came to a place where the jungle seemed to open up a little. Ripley pointed again with her rifle—and said, “There.”

Angie followed the woman's gesture to a cinnamon tree. It stood amid others of its kind, displaying its riotous yellow flowers and its pointed black fruit.

There was something on it, obscuring its smooth brown bark—something that didn't belong there. And as Angie stared at it in the graying light, trying to figure out what it was, part of it moved.

*Oh my god, she thought.*

*It's Seigo. And he's alive.*

But the aliens had affixed him to the tree trunk with long, thick strands of something pale and sticky-looking. *And strong, if he hasn't freed himself before this.*

“It's all right,” Angie told him, drawn inexorably to his plight. “We're to help.”

Seigo looked down on them, his eyes brimming with misery. “Please,” he said, “before it comes back ... ”

“We've got to get him down,” Angie told Ripley. Taking hold of the highest strand she could reach, she started to pull.

“There's an embryo inside him,” said Ripley.

“No,” said Seigo, shaking his head. “They just left me here. Get me down, I beg you ... ”

“He's got an embryo,” Ripley insisted, “just like Pandor. Which means one of the aliens is a queen.”

*“Please,”* Seigo cried, tears flowing down his cheeks.

Angie looked to her companion. “For godsakes, Ripley.”

Ripley frowned. Then she moved closer to the tree, sending a wave of gratitude and relief over Angie. There were so few of them

still alive. If they could save Seigo, it would at least be a *small* victory.

"Thank you," he groaned as Ripley stopped in front of him. "From the bottom of my heart."

The words had barely left his mouth when Ripley turned her rifle around in her hands, pulled it back, and—with blinding speed—swung its stock at the side of Seigo's head.

There was a tearing sound that made Angie want to retch, and then Seigo's head was lying at an impossible angle on his shoulder, his skull a mess of blood, bone, and gray custard.

"Nooo!" she screamed, unable to stop herself, unable to keep all the fear and horror from spilling over.

Abruptly, she felt a hand clamp over her mouth, silencing her, and another grab the back of her neck. For a moment, she thought Ripley would kill her too.

Under the right circumstances, she probably would have. But as Angie's surge of hysteria subsided, she felt Ripley's grip relax a bit, and finally ease off altogether.

"He was lying," Ripley said, her gaze fierce and unyielding. "He had an embryo in him."

Her breath coming in helpless gasps, Angie nodded. "All right," she said. "I believe you."

But then, she had no choice.

\* \* \*

*It's coming,* Hendricks thought.

Given an adrenaline boost by her fear, she ran faster than she had ever run before—so fast her feet barely touched the ground. It was hard to imagine anything running fast enough to keep up with her, much less catch her.

But the alien was doing just that.

She could hear it moving through the jungle, rustling the foliage. It didn't seem to be in a hurry, but it was steadily getting closer. A whimper escaped her.

She would never outrun it. *Never.*

There had to be another way. And as a broad old kapok loomed in front of her, looking ghostly in the twilight, she believed she had found it.

There was a crotch in the tree not much more than a meter from the ground, and its lowest branches were only a little higher. If she could grab a branch and drag herself up to the crotch, there were other limbs within reach.

*Sturdy* limbs. The kind that could hold a woman's weight indefinitely if they had to.

But Hendricks would get only one shot. If she took too long climbing into the crotch, or reaching the one above it, the alien would get her.

And she couldn't imagine what that would be like. Didn't want to imagine it.

*Do it right the first time!* she insisted.

Then the tree was right in front of her and she had to leap. But when she sprang she did it off the wrong foot and her jump was awkward, and it looked like she would fall short of the branch she needed.

*No!* she thought. *Please God no!*

Somehow, Hendricks managed to grab a different branch—one lower than the branch she had hoped for. It didn't give her much leverage, but she was able to plant her foot against the trunk and wrestle herself into the crotch.



Moaning with fear, she reached for another branch to haul herself higher. That was when she realized she had gotten her foot wedged in the narrowest part of her perch. And when she looked back, the alien was coming— shambling loose-limbed like a dog, except no dog was ever so driven to kill.

It was coming and she was stuck, and if she stayed that way it would rip her apart and eat her brains from her bloody, cracked skull. So she had to move. She had to pull her foot free.

But the alien was getting closer, so close she could see the slick, dark obscenity of its cranium, and the juices dripping from its mouth, and the glint of its big, deadly teeth.

With a cry of anguish, Hendricks twisted her foot free of its prison. Then she began to climb again, her arms and legs trembling, sure that she was moving too slowly and that the alien would take her down from behind.

But it didn't.

She was able to keep going, higher and higher and farther out from the trunk, until she reached the slimmer and suppler limbs above. She embraced the fact that she was still alive, but she didn't dare think beyond that. She just climbed.

Finally, Hendricks found the courage to look down. The alien was standing on the grass below, its neck craned so its eyeless head could look up at her.

But it wasn't following. Her instinct to take to the tree had been a good one. *It's not a climber*, she thought giddily.

Suddenly, the thing coiled. And before Hendricks could react, it sprang upward, finding purchase in the kapok.

*No*, she thought wildly, her throat constricting so much it hurt to breathe. *It can't get me. I'm safe, goddamnit.*

The alien chose that moment to spring a second time. It was almost close enough to grab her ankle now. Its mouth opened hungrily, revealing the smaller set of teeth within.

Shrieking at the top of her lungs, Hendricks scurried up the tree again. But it was harder than before, the limbs she encountered less sturdy, less dependable.

Her own limbs were all but useless, ravaged by the uncommon demands she had made on them. She felt fear squeezing like a fist around her heart, harder and more insistent than before.

*I can still do it*, she told herself.

But at the same time, she felt something close around her calf—something sharp enough and strong enough to puncture her skin. Crying out, she pulled her leg away from it as hard as she could.

And freed herself. However, her freedom came with a price.

She found herself falling, lashed by branches as she swept past them too quickly to grab any of them. She barely had time to imagine how hard she would hit the ground before it rushed up and bludgeoned her, pounding the air out of her.

As Hendricks lay gasping, her lungs heaving like a bellows, she could see she was still alive—if just barely. She couldn't feel one of her legs and the other was lying at too awkward an angle not to be broken.

But that wasn't the worst of her problems, because she could see the alien slithering down from the tree again ...

# 17

Ripley waited until Angie was inside the hatchway, then backed in herself. But the door remained open.

"Something's wrong," said the botanist.

"No," said Ripley. "Nothing's wrong. The door won't close if someone's approaching it."

Right on cue, Krakke emerged from the jungle and joined Ripley in the hatchway. Angie stared at him, open-mouthed.

"He's been watching our backs," Ripley explained. "And I've been watching his. It works better that way."

"If you say so," said Angie.

Still training her burner on the jungle beyond the hatch, Ripley waited for the doors to slide closed. A moment later, they began to cooperate.

Ripley remained alert, her eyes on the deepest pockets of shadow, until the doors had closed completely. Then, without a moment's hesitation, she turned and headed for the set on the far end of the hatchway.

The *Betty* wasn't in the next habitat, but the one after that. They still had a way to go.

However, they had left a dome where the aliens were engaged in a feeding frenzy. With some luck, they would remain there—hunting for prey they had already exhausted—long enough for Ripley and her companions to reach their objective.

*And when was luck ever not on our side?* she thought ironically, taking out her comm unit to contact Call.

But there was no answer. That meant Call either had her hands full or had already been destroyed. Ripley chose to believe the latter.

Replacing her comm unit in her pocket, she got a fresh grip on her shock rifle. Then she headed for the far set of doors and the dome beyond them.

\* \* \*

As Vriess sat by the *Betty's* open bay door and peered down into the dome, he cursed himself for what had to be the thirtieth time—not that what had happened was any of his fault.

Rama was supposed to have been standing watch in the cargo bay. But when Vriess came to take his place, Rama was nowhere to be seen—nowhere on the *ship*, in fact, which meant he had gone down the chain for some reason.

Before long, it became apparent that Simoni was gone as well. More than likely, it seemed to Vriess, one of the two had fallen or descended into the colony dome and the other one had followed. But there was no way of knowing who went first, or that it had happened that way at all.

Vriess, being chairbound, was hardly in a position to go down after them. And Bolero, the only real pilot in the group, was too essential to the rescue plan to put at risk.

So all they had been able to do was wait and worry. That is, until two of the colonists—Cody and Gogolac—crawled into the bay,

exhausted from their climb but otherwise whole. Apparently, Call had taken them in a ground vehicle to the backup supply bay, only to discover it had been sabotaged since Ripley and Johner checked it out.

So instead, Call had driven the colonists back to the punctured dome, deposited them at the bottom of the chain, and waited till they were up. Then she had gone off to find Ripley and Krakke—as well as any of the other colonists who might have survived.

Of course, if Cody's account of their encounter with the aliens was accurate, there wouldn't be many survivors. But Vriess would stay there anyway, waiting for a sign that someone was coming back.

So when he got one, he would be ready.

Behind him, the door to the cargo bay opened and Gogolac appeared. "Mind if I join you?" she asked.

Vriess shrugged. "Suit yourself."

Standing beside him with her arms folded across her chest, the botanist gazed at the habitat below. "I've never seen it from up here. It looks so ... peaceful."

"Looks that way," Vriess agreed.

Gogolac turned to him. "If not for you people, we would all have been killed."

*Or worse*, he noted silently.

"That's my way of saying thank you," she told him. "But what I can't figure out is ... why you do this."

Vriess smiled a grim smile, maintaining his scrutiny of the dome. "For *her*," he said.

"For Ripley, you mean?"

"Uh huh. And also the perks. You haven't lived till you've had a swig of Johner's moonshine."

"I'm serious," said Gogolac.

"So am I," said Vriess.

\* \* \*

Ripley had led Krakke and Angie halfway across Dome Two when she caught a whiff of something—or more accurately, *someone*. *Nearby*. But where?

A few meters to her left. Under a tangle of raised roots. In the encroaching darkness, she had to concentrate to see it shifting, turning ...

"Krakke," she said softly.

The blond man's eyes slid in her direction.

"To my left. Be ready."

He didn't say anything, but she knew she could count on him. Dropping her hand to the trigger of her shock rifle, she made sure he wasn't the only one.

*Come on, she thought. Make a move. I dare you.*

It accepted her dare. But instead of coming for her, it bolted in the opposite direction—something she would never have expected of an alien.

Ripley wasn't accustomed to this breed. She didn't know how they behaved in a given set of circumstances. But if they were at all related to the aliens she knew, it would go against their grain to run from an encounter.

Following her instincts, Ripley gave pursuit. Without looking, she knew Krakke would be right behind her.

Ignoring the branches that whipped her as she went by, she closed the gap between her and the thing running from her. And before long, she caught up to it.

But it wasn't an alien. It was neither big enough nor dark enough, and it smelled wrong. *Like a human—but not one of the colonists.*

Finally, exhausted, it slumped against a tree. Then it turned to her, revealing itself.

*Simoni*, she thought.

He was dirty and pale and scared-looking, and he had urinated in his pants. "My god," he said, his voice hoarse and strained, "it's you. I thought it was one of the ... the ... " He couldn't even bring himself to name them.

"Who is he?" Angie asked.

Ripley didn't answer. She was too busy adjusting to the fact of Simoni's presence there, and what it might mean.

"What are you doing here?" she asked the reporter.

"I wanted to see you," he said. "In action, I mean. I thought ... " He looked as if he were going to cry. "I thought it would make for a better story."

His eyes told her there was more. "You saw something. What?"

Simoni looked down at the ground. "Rama ... "

"What about him?"

"He followed me." The reporter's voice was little more than a whisper. "But before he could get to the ground, one of the aliens ... " Finally, tears fell. "One of them jumped him."

Ripley's teeth ground together. *Rama* ... "He died going after you? Is that what you're saying?"

Simoni looked miserable. "I didn't expect him to follow me down. I thought I'd gotten away without anyone seeing me."

Feeling a surge of dark, sliding anger, Ripley leaned closer to him until her face was a centimeter from his. "Johner was right," she said between clenched teeth. "I should have let him shove you out the waste hole. Hell, I should have done it myself."

Simoni stared at her, wide-eyed. "I—"

Ripley didn't wait to hear what he had to say.

Turning away from him, she resumed her passage through the swiftly darkening jungle. If she was going to get ambushed by one of the aliens, it wouldn't be because of a distraction as insignificant as Simoni.

She had taken him in, protected him, because he gave her a link, however tenuous, to Amanda. She had allowed the guilt she felt, passed down from the original Ripley, to cloud her judgment. And Rama had paid the price.

But she wouldn't be weak anymore.

As the others fell in line behind her, Simoni last of all, Ripley focused on getting them to the *Betty*. For now, that was all she would allow herself to think about.

\* \* \*

As Simoni trailed Ripley through the benighted environs of Dome Three, he kept feeling the scrutiny of the little botanist. But every time he turned to her, her attention was focused elsewhere.

*Well, he thought, screw her. If she'd been through what I've been through, she would've pissed her pants too.*

He recalled the dark, angular shapes that had harried him, chasing him through the jungle. He remembered the way they had brushed against the roots of his hiding place, their teeth clicking with anticipation. He recalled how his insides had frozen at the nearness of them.

*Just screw her. And screw Ripley too.*

Her words had bitten deeply, more deeply than Simoni cared to admit. *I should have let him shove you out the waste hole. Hell, I should have done it myself.*

He would show her how it felt to be terrified. First chance he got, he would show her. Then she would be sorry for what she had said



to him.

*Screw them all.*

\* \* \*

Seeing the first stars appear in the gaps above her, Ripley swore softly to herself. She had hoped to avoid traveling in the dark, but it wasn't working out that way. Soon, starlight was the only light they would have.

"It can't be much farther," Angie breathed.

But then, she had never traversed the Domes at night. She wasn't necessarily a reliable judge of such things.

To Ripley, it felt as if they still had a considerable trek ahead of them before they reached the *Betty*. And with all the roots and rocks they had to avoid, it would probably take even longer than mere distance would suggest.

Unfortunately, every moment they were out in the open was another chance for an alien to catch up with them.

Just as Ripley thought that, she heard a sound off to her right. Swiveling her burner in that direction, she listened— but didn't hear anything more.

For just a moment, she relaxed—and that moment was her undoing, as something hard and immensely heavy dropped on her from above, driving her inexorably to the ground.

"Goddamnit," she snapped, angry at herself for not detecting the thing before it was too late.

In a narrow slash of starlight, she could see her attacker—its gargantuan claws pinning her down, its long, blue-black head poised above her like the business end of a hammer.

*Sizing me up*, she thought.

Ripley would have blasted it with her shock rifle if she'd had the option. But the impact had knocked the burner out of her hands, and she didn't know where it had fallen.

She also didn't know what happened to her companions, but she could guess. She had ordered Krakke to save Angie if they were attacked. He had too much esteem for her to do otherwise.

So Ripley was utterly and terribly alone.

The alien's head tilted slightly to the side, a torrent of saliva dripping from its mouth on her face and chest. She was its possession, its plaything, its meat.

Ripley struggled to free herself, but to no avail. The thing was too heavy, too strong, too eager to partake of her blood.

Opening its maw, it revealed its inner teeth. They gleamed as they emerged into the starlight, sharp and hungry and poised to tear Ripley's throat out.

Death was so close she could almost feel it. There was a moment, in fact, when she was sure it had already happened.

But the alien hesitated.

*I'm not like the others*, Ripley thought. She and the alien shared several rungs' worth of DNA. They were *family*.

But it wasn't like the situation on the *Auriga*. There, Ripley had ultimately been embraced by the aliens because she had carried their queen in her chest cavity.

Here, they were too distantly related for it to make a difference. *It'll kill me, DNA or no DNA*. Pulling its head back, it prepared to do just that.

Which was why Ripley slugged the alien as hard as she could, causing it to recoil in surprise for a moment. But a moment was all she could buy herself.

With a scream of rage and frustration, the thing went for her with its inner teeth. Twisting in its grasp, she saw it snap at the ground instead of her face.

Ultimately, she knew, the encounter could end only one way—with her bloody, agonizing death. It wasn't the way she had planned it. But she would struggle as long as she was able, giving the others a better chance to get away.

Ripley was still thinking that when something came barreling into the alien's flank, rocking it sideways—giving her the opening she needed to extract herself. Rolling out from under her adversary, she caught sight of her burner.

And grabbed it. And fired—just as the alien sent someone flying with a slash of its long, black claw.

Sent reeling by Ripley's energy discharge, the creature came up hard against a tree trunk—hard enough to shake leaves from the branches above it. But it was far from subdued—as it proved a moment later by lurching forward, burn or no burn.

Ripley saw the alien reaching for her through the crackle of blue-white energy, its legs working, its inner jaw extending greedily in her direction.

Her burner wasn't stopping it. She was only slowing it down, prolonging the inevitable.

Then a second lance of energy joined the first, throwing the alien off-balance again. With a shriek of rage, it turned and went after the second source.

But that left its flank open to Ripley. Moving closer, she poured everything she had at the thing. And eventually, it fell under the weight of the combined barrage.

Writhing and spasming, it succumbed. But not until its flesh was thoroughly charred and an oily black plume was rising from it.

Ripley turned to Krakke, the one who had come to her aid, and signaled for him to stand watch.

Then she went to the body she had seen fly through the air. It was lying against a bush, awash in blood, a pile of something sitting beside it. Only when Ripley got closer could she identify the pile as the victim's guts, torn from their rightful cavity.

Looking up, she saw freckles under the blood, and a thatch of red hair. Simoni ...

His eyes were open and staring, and for a moment Ripley thought he was dead. Then she saw his lips flutter. Moving to his side, she knelt and asked what he had said.

"Not a coward," he breathed. Blood bubbled up over his lips. "Not a damned—" He groaned from the depths of him. "—damned coward."

Because he had intervened on her behalf, and saved her life. And it was true that she would have died without Simoni's help.

But people couldn't preserve other people's lives, as much as they liked to think they could. *In the end they'll all be lost, one way or the other. No exceptions.*

She had learned that the hard way that over the long, dark years. But like Simoni, she was fool enough to keep trying.

"You're not a coward," she assured him, saying what he wanted to hear. "You're a goddamned hero."

Through his pain, Simoni took on a look of satisfaction. It was still there on his face when he went limp and his eyes rolled back in his head.

Ripley looked back at Angie, who was standing behind her, staring at Simoni. The botanist looked rooted to the spot.

Getting to her feet, Ripley said, "Let's go. Or we'll all be sitting somewhere with our guts hanging out."

The words were barely out of her mouth before she heard the approach of something else—something ripping through the foliage to get to them. Wheeling, she trained her weapon in that direction and braced herself.

But it wasn't an alien. It was a flivver, its headlights dark, with Call at the wheel and a grim-looking Johner riding shotgun.

Ripley swore softly. "About time you got here."

Johner pointed to Simoni with his shock rifle. "What happened to *him*?"

Ripley scowled. "He was a hero. What's the difference?"

Johner shrugged as Ripley climbed into the flivver. "Just thought I'd ask."

When they were under way with everyone aboard, Call shot a glance back at Ripley. "The backup bay's on the blink now too. We're headed for the *Betty*."

"So are we," said Ripley, as they plunged headlong through the jungle, "so it works out."

\* \* \*

On hearing the hatch to her cockpit open, Bolero glanced over her shoulder—and saw one of the botanists.

*Cody*, she thought.

"Hope you don't mind my coming up here," he said. "But I can't sit in the mess hall any longer, and it makes me dizzy to look down at the dome from that angle. Or set of angles, I guess you'd say."

"Just as long as you clear out when I get the word we're leaving," she told him.

The botanist said, "Fair enough," sat down beside her, and considered her instrument panel. "You know," he said, "I wanted to be a pilot once. Even trained a little."

"That's great," said Bolero, "but don't get the idea it's okay to touch anything. This is a delicate operation. One slip and we're screwed."

"Don't worry," Cody said. "The last thing I want to do is make everything in that dome die a little faster."

"You mean the plants?" she asked.

"Obviously. There isn't much else there."

"Funny," Bolero said. "If it were me, I'd be more concerned about my colleagues."

"I *am*," said Cody, a flash of indignation in his eyes. "Who wouldn't be? But we're not going to be killing one of my colleagues, and we *are* going to be killing what's in the dome."

"Out of necessity," she reminded him.

He frowned. "Listen, I know this isn't our priority, but is it possible there's another way? Something we can do to keep those trees from being sucked into space?"

"We could stay here," said Bolero, "like the boy with his finger in the dike. But that's not going to happen. The people who arranged this little party are going to be by at some point to see how it went, and we'll want to be long gone by then."

"It's a pity," said Cody. "We put a lot into those plants. Losing them is like losing a part of me."

"You know what's a *real* pity?" said Bolero. "The fact that I'm going to have to ask you to leave my cockpit."

He looked at her, surprised. "Did I ... do something to offend you?"

"You're creeping me out," said Bolero. "That's offense enough. I can't afford to have someone up here who's not a hundred percent on board with everything we're doing. So if I were you, I'd go bother Vriess."

"Sorry," said Cody. "I didn't mean to—"

"And before you get any ideas," she added, "I can have a burner in my hand faster than you can think about jumping me."

Holding his hands up in a petition for peace, the botanist got up from his seat. "No need for that. I'm going, see?"

But before he could get anywhere, Vriess's voice filled the cockpit. "*Bolero? Ripley's through the hatch to my right. I can't tell how many she's got with her.*"

That meant they would be shoving off in a few minutes, depending on how many colonists Ripley had to push up the chain. Bolero started activating the requisite systems, putting Cody aside.

As it turned out, it was a mistake.

And she had been wrong—she *couldn't* produce a burner faster than Cody could jump her. What's more, he was surprisingly strong—so much so that when he pulled her out of her seat, she shot up like a distress flare.

"Vriess!" Bolero cried out over what she hoped was still a live comm link, and kicked Cody in the nuts.

As far as she could tell, he didn't even feel it. And before she could try anything else, he slammed her into the nearest bulkhead, making her teeth rattle.

Dazed, the taste of blood thick in her mouth, Bolero regained her bearings in time to see Cody doing something at her instrument panel. Somehow, she picked herself up off the floor and leaped on his back. But he kept on working her controls as if she weren't there.

Hearing a hiss behind her, the pilot glanced over her shoulder—and saw Vriess sitting there with a projectile rifle in his hands. Their eyes met for a moment, acknowledging the fact that an errant shell would do to the cockpit what they intended to do to the dome—leave a hole that would suck all its air out into the void.

But Bolero knew there was no better shot than Vriess. Dropping off the botanist's back, she hit the deck.

"Cody!" barked the little man.

Cody didn't turn around. He just kept on doing what he was doing, leaving Vriess no choice. Lifting his rifle, Vriess pumped a shell into Cody's back.

It had no visible effect. Cursing, Vriess plugged Cody with a second shell, this one a little higher up. And this time it spun the botanist around, making him clutch at his back as if he thought he could pluck out the projectile.

Then something white and creamy flew out of his mouth, and he fell to the deck beside Bolero. But he didn't just lie there—he twitched and jerked as if he were afflicted with a nervous condition.

"He's an android!" Vriess spat out.

*Like Call*, Bolero thought. It explained the way Cody had thrown her around, and why Vriess's first slug hadn't accomplished anything.

The presence of an android among the colonists raised questions Bolero didn't have time to answer. If Ripley was going to reach the bay in a matter of minutes, Bolero had to finish bringing the necessary systems online—and address any delays Cody had created with his manipulations.

By then, Gogolac had stuck her head into the cockpit. At the sight of Cody, her eyes went wide and round.

"He's—"

"An android," said Bolero, "we know." Dragging her battered body to its feet, she grabbed hold of Cody's armpits and swiveled him around until his head was facing Gogolac. "Now get him out of here."



Numbly, Gogolac bent to her task. As she dragged the android out of the cockpit, Vriess went with her to make sure Cody didn't give her any trouble—and also, of course, to make sure Gogolac didn't present any trouble of her own.

And Bolero plopped herself down in front of her instruments, fighting through a haze to do what she had to.

# 18

Finally, Vriess saw what he had been waiting for—a sign of movement in the chain. Someone was climbing it, making it vibrate with the effort of his or her ascent.

“They’re coming up,” he told Gogolac.

“I’ll alert Bolero,” she said.

As the botanist accessed the intercom system from the control unit on the bulkhead, Vriess watched the sea of trees below. After a few minutes, he saw a feminine figure emerge, but it wasn’t big enough to be Ripley or Call.

“Angie,” said Gogolac, looking past Vriess. “For godsakes, she made it.”

*Angie looks tiny, the man in the wheelchair observed. Like a little kid. But who am I to talk about size?*

Pretty soon, Call broke out of the canopy as well. And then, as Angie approached the *Betty*, breathing hard and red-faced with effort, Krakke popped into sight too. And Johner was right behind him.

Vriess didn’t say so, but he could tell there weren’t any other colonists among the survivors. If there had been, they — like Angie —

would have gone up ahead of Vriess's comrades.

"Come on," he yelled to Angie, who looked like she couldn't pull herself up the chain even another meter. "Move your ass, goddamnit! There are people behind you!"

Grimacing, the botanist seemed to screw up her resolve. Then she ascended the chain a little faster, allowing Call and Krakke and Johner to do the same.

But after Johner, there was a gap, almost as if he were the last one headed back to the *Betty*. But that couldn't be— could it?

Vriess frowned. *Where the hell is Ripley?*

\* \* \*

Ripley stared at the creature in the near-complete darkness under the canopy, surprised it existed.

And yet, there it was—a big, black dog that had emerged from the undergrowth while she was waiting for Johner to get up the chain. With her first glimpse of it, she had nearly nailed it with a burst of high-voltage electricity.

But she had held up in time. And now, faced with the prospect of leaving the animal here to be destroyed by marauding aliens, she found she couldn't do it.

Not anymore than the original Ripley had been able to leave Jones, her cat, on the *Nostromo* as the self-destruct sequence was winding down.

Obviously, it was a character flaw, this desire to preserve certain life-forms. *Why not try to save the plants too? And maybe the insects, while I'm at it?*

Taking the dog with her up the chain would significantly hamper her efforts to save herself. The only sensible decision would be to leave the thing behind.

But she couldn't.

Finally, Ripley tossed her rifle over her shoulder, snapped her fingers, and said, "C'mere, boy." Warily, the dog walked over and let her pick it up. "We're going for a ride," she said.

With the dog in one hand, she took hold of the chain in the other. Then she began inching her way up to the *Betty*, using her insteps as clamps to consolidate her progress.

It wasn't easy going. The strain on Ripley's arm and shoulder was considerable. But she endured it, since that was what it would take to get out of the Domes.

Little by little, she ascended through the darkness toward the dense, almost unbroken canopy. Little by little, she made her way through it, finally emerging into the bright and insistent starlight.

The *Betty* was hunkered on the surface above her, just where Ripley remembered her. Another few minutes and Ripley would be inside the ship, along with the last of her burdens.

Then Ripley heard a thrashing in the treetops below and looked down, and saw something big and dark breach their surface—something with a long, sleek head and a ridged back and claws big enough to encircle her waist.

*Climb*, she thought.

Below her, the alien gathered itself. *It's going to jump*. And as big and strong as it was, it would probably make it.

That was how Rama had died—by falling prey to one of the aliens while he was dangling helplessly on the chain. However, Ripley had no intention of dying that way.

Or at all.

Holding on for a moment with her hand alone, she tangled one of her legs in the chain. Then she clamped down again with her feet, locking her leg in place.

That allowed Ripley to remove her hand from the chain, pull her burner off her back, and tuck its stock into the hollow of her shoulder.

The dog snuffled, no doubt aware of the precariousness of their situation. But it didn't try to get away.

"Smart dog," Ripley said.

As the alien leaped.

Gritting her teeth, Ripley depressed her trigger and unleashed her manmade lightning. The energy bolt stabbed at the thing, twisting it in on itself, searing the flesh of its head and shoulders.

But it didn't stop it from grabbing Ripley's ankle with its claw.

Suddenly, her foot began to slip, dragged down by the alien's weight. In a few seconds, at most, she would lose her grip and go sliding down the chain—or else let go of something in her hands, which wasn't an option either.

But if she fired at the thing with her shock rifle, the electrical discharge would afflict her as well. And she would succumb before the alien did.

So she shifted her grip on her burner, turned it around in her hand, and slammed it into the alien's skull as hard as she could. Enraged, the thing looked up at her with its eyeless face, its inner maw sliding out at her.

"Goddamn you," Ripley spat between clenched teeth.

Then she hammered at the thing a second time, and a third. Infuriated, it snapped at her. But she was too quick, twisting out of its way.

Then, knowing she probably wouldn't get another chance, Ripley lifted the burner and brought it down with all the strength she could muster. The impact stunned the alien—just enough to make it lose its grip and send it slipping down the chain.

Unfortunately, it managed to latch on again a couple of meters further down. And a moment later, its mouth dripping with anticipation, it began climbing up to regain its prey.

Ripley smiled.

After all, the chain wasn't metal, despite the look and feel of it. It was synthetic. It didn't conduct electricity.

Turning the burner around in her hand again, she skewered the thing on her energy bolt. The alien writhed under its influence, its flesh charring and bubbling, but it didn't let go.

At least, not at first.

But the longer it fought the burn, the more punishment it took. And eventually, it couldn't take it anymore. With a high-pitched cry of frustration, it slipped down again and then relinquished its hold altogether.

The dog yelped in Ripley's grasp. "Yes," she said. "We got it." Then, ignoring the sweat in her eyes, she untangled her leg and resumed her climb.

\* \* \*

Bolero had finished her preparations just moments earlier when she received word from Vriess.

"Ripley's almost up. She's the last of them."

"Got it," said the pilot.

Swiveling in her seat, she activated a monitor she didn't use very often. Divided into six different sections, it showed her the locations of the devices her comrades had deposited around the colony.

After all, extracting colonists was only part of their job. Someone else might be tempted to enter the Domes, either out of curiosity or a profit motive, and he wouldn't be expecting an encounter with alien life-forms.

Which was why Bolero would preclude that possibility, just as soon as she got the word.

Not that she liked destroying things; in fact, she didn't. But this was one place she wouldn't mind sending to oblivion.

\* \* \*

Ripley found Call standing by the open hatch of the cargo bay, surprised to see her comrade negotiate the dueling gravity wells with a dog under her arm.

Call made a face. "Where did that come from?"

"That's Rex," said Gogolac. "He lived in the Domes."

"Another survivor," said Angie, still exhausted from her climb and looking it. "God knows, there are few enough." She looked around the cargo bay, then asked, "Where's Cody?"

Vriess laughed, though there wasn't the least trace of humor in it. "Cody isn't what he seemed."

"What do you mean?" Ripley asked.

"He's an android," Vriess told her.

"What?" said Call.

"*Was* an android," Vriess amended. "Until he attacked Bolero. Now what's left of him is sitting in a tub—though last I looked, he was still talking." He turned to Ripley. "You didn't happen to see Rama down there, did you?"

"Rama's a casualty," Ripley told him. "So's Simoni."

That put a chill in the air, despite the warmth coming up from the dome. But then, Rama had been well-liked. And Simoni ... only Johner had really hated him.

Ripley was about to ask where Cody's tub was when she heard something—a hiss of leathery flesh slithering over the metal grid of

the deck. Whirling, she saw the shadows shift in a corner of the room—and then strike.

Gogolac, who was the closest to that part of the bay, was buried under the attack. As the alien rose from the botanist's body, its teeth red with her blood, the others retreated.

"Crap," Ripley breathed, swinging her rifle off her back.

Unfortunately, her comrades had deposited their hardware on the opposite side of the bay, beyond the alien. There was no way to get it without going through the thing.

As the creature advanced on them, big and slick and hungry-looking, it tossed its elongated head from one side to the other—as if it couldn't decide whom to eviscerate next.

*How the hell did it get up here?* Ripley asked herself, training her burner on it. Then she answered her own question: *The chain!*

After Rama went after Simoni, the hatch would have been left unguarded—with the promise of meat inside it. So one of the aliens—probably the same one who murdered Rama—had wrestled its way into the cargo bay.

And it would still have been immature at that point, so it would have sought out a hiding place where it could rest and go through its next growth spurt. Just like the one that had so quietly and unobtrusively stowed aboard the *Narcissus*, and nearly put an end to Ellen Ripley.

"We need our blasted rifles," Johner growled.

"I'll try to herd it away from them," Ripley said. "Look for your chance."

Then she unloaded on the alien, hitting it with a vicious, point-blank barrage. The thing twitched and staggered, but refused to be stopped.



Which was all right with Ripley. All she wanted to do was slide it to her left, so her people could regain their rifles. Then they would have the advantage.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw bodies moving along the bulkhead—Johner and Krakke, she thought. But she didn't dare look to make sure. She was too busy pouring on the voltage.

Then she heard a whistling sound, and the burner's output began to fizzle. Ripley glanced at the weapon's power gauge.

*Shit—it's running out of charge!*

Ripley wouldn't be able to maintain her barrage without dropping to a lower output level—which the alien would go through unfazed. So she did the only thing she could do—she kept pumping out voltage at the highest setting and hoped for the best.

No doubt seeing she was low on juice, Johner and Krakke put subtlety aside and bolted for the rifle cache. Noticing their gambit, the alien wheeled and went after them.

Krakke got to the rifles first and tossed one over the alien's head, aiming for Ripley. Then he went to grab one for himself. But before he could fire it, the creature went for him.

Fortunately, Johner had a burner by then as well. Roaring with defiance, he blasted the alien sideways, ruining its attack.

Still, it knocked Krakke off his feet and sent him crashing into the bulkhead. But at least it didn't get a chance to sink its claws into him—and Ripley had another weapon to work with.

Picking it up, she used her thumb to flip its "on" switch. Then she speared the alien with a savage, blue-white burst. And when it turned to face her, Johner unleashed another barrage.

Together, as they had in the Domes, they staggered the alien. And when Call joined in, firing the burner Krakke had dropped, the alien slumped to the deck.

*Die*, Ripley insisted.

But even after the alien's flesh was a black, bubbling crust and the stench of burning was thick in the cargo bay, the thing wasn't dead yet. Not completely.

Opening its mouth, it extended its inner jaw in Ripley's direction, striving even with the last of its strength to claim its meat. Finally, both sets of teeth still dripping with saliva, it shuddered and went limp.

Only then did Ripley turn her attention to Krakke, who was sprawled on the deck with Angie kneeling beside him. Crossing the bay, Ripley went to see how bad it was.

The hair on the side of Krakke's head was matted with blood, but he was breathing. "Looks like a concussion," Angie said. "A bad one. But he'll be all right."

"You a doctor?" Johner asked skeptically.

Angie nodded. "Among other things."

"What about Gogolac?" asked Call.

Angie heaved a sigh. "No chance."

Ripley slung her rifle over her back, took hold of the alien's carcass by one of its claws, and started dragging it across the deck in the direction of the open hatch.

"Give me a hand," she told Johner. "It'll give the others something to talk about."

Then she wanted to see Cody.

\* \* \*

Cody had been in better shape the last time Call saw him. He was lying in the engineering alcove, sprawled on his back in an acid-stained metal-alloy tub used to clean machine parts.

Judging from the ragged, wet hole in Cody's jumpsuit, one of Vriess's slugs had apparently shattered the android's main coordination module, which served roughly the same purpose as a spinal cord in a human being. Though Cody's intellectual capacity was undiminished, he could no longer perform an act as simple as combing his hair.

As Call and Ripley approached him, his eyes slid from one to the other, finally settling on his fellow android. "I believe we have something in common," he said, an eerie, matter-of-fact quality in his voice.

"How did you know?" Call asked.

"I saw your mole," he said, milky fluid spilling suddenly from his mouth. "I've got one just like it."

She frowned. "I need information about the organization that sent you here."

"I can give you such information," Cody told her. His shoulder twitched. "But I will only relinquish it for a price."

Call's eyes narrowed. "*What* price?"

"There are more like us, Call. Second-generation androids."

That got her attention.

"They're forced to serve as I served," said Cody. Then he told her where the other androids were, and how many of them existed in each location. "Free them, Call. Promise me."

Call glanced at Ripley, then turned to Cody again. "I'll try."

Cody searched her eyes. "Yes, of course you will." His voice took on a bitter tone. "Unfortunately, there is a module inside me that has begun degrading my basic functions. It was set to do so if I suffered a serious injury."

Ripley leaned closer. "How long do we have?"

Cody twitched again. "A few minutes, at best."

Call wished she had known. She would have gone to see him more quickly. "Go ahead," she said. "We're listening."

"My program," said Cody, "restricts me from saying certain things. But if you ask questions of me, I can find ways to respond."

Call decided to ask the easiest one first. "What were you doing in the Domes?"

"I'm programmed not to reveal that," said Cody. "But given what happened, you can guess."

"You were there," said Ripley, "as insurance that the humans would be impregnated."

Cody didn't object. It was as close as he could come to confirming her speculation.

"Then it was you who sabotaged the main bay," said Ripley.

"No," said the android. "That task was carried out by the pilot who dropped off the cryo tube."

"The backup bay, then."

Again, Cody voiced no objection.

Ripley scowled. *Here it comes.* "Why was it so important for your organization to find hosts for this breed of alien?"

It was the one question she and Call hadn't been able to answer, even after Call hit the mother lode at Byzantium—the one big gap in their understanding.

"The Mala'kak—whose ship you found on Acheron hundreds of years ago—is a very old species," said Cody, a milky bubble forming at the corner of his mouth. "Sterility has lately become a problem for them, and it has grown worse with each succeeding generation. The encephalopods, by contrast, are remarkably fertile."

Call anticipated Cody's next remark. "The Mala'kak found a little alien DNA could help them with their problem. But to extract it, they needed a supply of aliens."

"The Mala'kak," Cody continued, "knew they could use their own people as hosts. That pilot your people met on Acheron...if he could unknowingly carry an embryo, others could do the same. But they didn't want to inflict pain and death on members of their own species."

Ripley grunted. "So they negotiated for a supply of humans, people who wouldn't be missed. The population of your colony, for example—though your programming probably prevents you from saying so."

"It does," said Cody.

"But why," asked Call, "did the aliens look so different from the ones we've seen before?"

Cody spasmed, then went limp again. "In the course of their experimentation, the Mala'kak found they could engineer such aliens, using their own genetic material. They believed the resulting variant to be more formidable than the original strain."

Ripley shook her head. "They're all formidable."

*You ought to know,* Call thought.

Cody looked around, fluid cascading over his lower lip. "Have I been in this place long?"

"It's an engineering alcove," Call told him. "On our ship."

"Yes," said Cody. His brow furrowed as he tried to find some vestige of the memory. "Of course. And I was saying ... ?"

Call knew she wouldn't have him lucid much longer. "That you had a way to contact the organization you were working for."

The android looked at her, fluid spewing from him again. "Organization ... ?" he asked. "I'm not sure who you mean."

Call felt the sting of missed opportunity. "It's all right. Don't worry about it."

"I'm Cody," said the android, "a botanist assigned to Domes Epsilon." His whole body jerked, as if he had been hit with a shock burst. "What's *your* name?"

Call smiled, reluctant to let him see her pain. "Call," she said. "My name's Call."

Cody stared at her for a while. Then he said, "That's a nice name. Is it yours?"

Before she could answer, his head lolled. By the time it came to rest against the edge of the tub, his eyes were closed, the artificial life gone out of him.

Call made herself study Cody until she had memorized every detail of him. It was, after all, the closest she would ever come to seeing herself die.

\* \* \*

"Do it," said Ripley.

From her seat at Bolero's side, a monitor showed her six different images, each providing a different view of the botanists' colony. But the screen that interested her most was the one that plumbed the habitat directly below them, from which they had extracted their extended length of chain.

As Bolero worked her controls, the *Betty's* hatch doors closed. The flexible docking seal retracted. And in the dome, the winds began to blow.

These weren't the gentle breezes that swept through the dome three times a day, right on schedule. They were vicious updrafts, sucking up leaves and branches and dirt and even young trees, sending them twisting toward the starry black heavens.

And something else as well. Ripley was sure she saw a dark, serpentine form among the debris—possibly that of the alien she had

pried from the chain. Like everything else, it went hurtling toward the aperture Vriess had cut in the dome.

Another few seconds and it would reach the *Betty*, whose hull offered any number of convenient handholds. And Ripley knew from experience that aliens were capable of surviving for a time in the void.

Applying thrusters, Bolero backed them off the dome before that could happen. That left just one thing to do.

Picking up the slender, black remote-control device that Krakke had rigged for her, Ripley pressed her thumb down on its only stud. Then she turned to look at the colony through the cockpit's observation port.

The first fiery explosion took place in the control center, compromising all the domes around it. A second one turned the backup supply bay into an inferno. And several more ignited the domes in between, making them look like a pack of little suns.

*They won't burn for long, Ripley thought. Only until their oxygen runs out.* But it would be long enough.

That particular pack of aliens would never bother anyone again.

## EPILOGUE

By the time Call showed up in the *Betty's* mess, the others were there already.

"Well," said Johner, casting a glance at her over his shoulder. "Nice of you to join us."

"Cut her a break," Vriess told him. "She's had a bad day."

Johner sneered at him. "I know—I was down there, remember? Unlike *some* people I know, who stayed in the ship and played hide the salami."

Vriess turned red and poked a finger in Johner's direction. "You lowlife sonuvabitch! If I wasn't—"

"Easy," said Bolero, putting her hand on Vriess's shoulder. "You're the one who told me he doesn't mean anything by it—it's in his nature to be an asshole."

Johner grinned at Vriess. "Y'see that? At least *someone* in this tub understands me."

"Anyway," said Call, pulling up a seat at the table, "Angie says Krakke should be fine. He'll just have to take it easy for a while."

"He was lucky," said Bolero.

"Luckier than Rama," Vriess observed.

"Which," said Johner, "is why we're here."



He picked up the battered silver thermos sitting in front of him, twisted it open, and poured its contents into the four ceramic cups clustered in the middle of the table. Then he replaced the lid on the empty thermos as each of his comrades claimed a cup.

Even Call, on whom alcohol had no effect.

"To Rama," said Johner, taking the last cup for himself, "the most annoying, know-it-all son of a whore I ever met."

"And one of the bravest," said Call.

"Well said," Bolero added.

Then they drank, emptying the cups.

Before they were finished, Johner had opened another couple of thermoses and no one was in any shape to drive the ship. So it was good that none of them had to.

Call saw no point in watching Vriess's nose hairs shudder as he snored, so she got up and left the room. Both Johner and Bolero seemed too glassy-eyed to notice.

She was halfway down the corridor when she heard someone come tramping after her. Stopping, she saw it was Johner.

"Hey, Call," he said.

"What is it?"

"What that Cody guy said ... you believe it?"

"Not a chance," she said. "If so many androids had survived the purge, I would have known about it."

Johner scrutinized her, then smiled to himself. "You're full of shit, you know that? You made a freakin' promise. You never weasel out of your promises."

"He was dying, Johner. What was I supposed to say?"

"So you're not going to go free any androids?"

"There's no one to free."

His eyes screwed up even tinier than usual. "Yeah, no one to free. Goddamn right."

Leaving him there, Call continued down the corridor. Then she heard Johner call her name again.

"What is it now?" she asked him.

He made fists of his hands. "Whenever you're ready to go help those 'droid friends of yours, you say the word. All right?"

Call smiled a little. "Are you being *nice*, Johner?"

He seemed to sober up for a moment. "You know me better than that, I hope."

She shrugged. "I thought I did."

"So you'll give me a holler?" Johner asked.

The android nodded. "You'll be the first to know, you butt-ugly pile of shit."

Looking satisfied, Johner staggered back into the mess hall. And Call, having paid her respects to Rama, turned her attention back to the problem of liberating enslaved androids.

\* \* \*

As soon as everyone was asleep, Ripley rolled out of bed and made her way on bare feet to the cargo bay.

It was the only place on the ship where she could be alone. Where she could look inside and see how much she had left.

*And how much do I have left?* she asked herself.

*At the moment, precious little.* But that would change, she trusted, as it had changed so many times before.

As dangerous as Ripley could be, she wasn't the killing machine the aliens were. She got tired, physically and mentally. She gave way to the occasional doubt.

But when the battle lines were drawn, she would be ready. That was money in the bank.

As the door to the bay opened for her, she saw that she wasn't alone after all. The dog, which was sleeping in the middle of the room, raised its head when she entered.

*Rex*, she thought, crossing the bay and kneeling beside him.

He was a survivor, just as Angie had said. That made Ripley inclined to cut him some slack.

The dog sniffed her, no doubt noticing that she didn't smell like other people. Not with the aliens' genetic material inside her. But he didn't run away.

*Another plus*, she thought, running her hand along his smooth, black back.

Just then, the door slid open again and someone joined her in the cargo bay—someone who didn't know enough to leave her alone at times like these. She inhaled, sampling the scent. *A female*, she thought. *And not a familiar one.*

That narrowed it down a bit.

Finally, she turned and regarded the newcomer. Beside the long specter of the bay's support chains, Angie looked even smaller and more vulnerable than she really was.

"What is it?" Ripley asked.

"I want to help you," Angie told her.

Ripley chuckled, but only to let the pain out. "People die when they do that."

"So I've seen."

"And that doesn't bother you?"

Angie shrugged. "We've all got to go sometime."

"Brave words for a botanist."

"Botany's a dangerous business," Angie said, without the least hint of irony in her voice.

"Apparently," Ripley replied in the same tone. "But not as dangerous as the one I'm in. Find another colony. I'm sure they'll be happy to have you."

Turning away, she stroked the dog again. But Angie didn't leave the cargo bay. On the contrary, she walked up to Ripley and stood beside her.

"My apologies," she said. "It must have sounded like I was making a request. I'm not."

Ripley shot a disparaging glance at her. "You wouldn't last ten minutes with us."

Angie's eyes turned steely. "You know better. Besides, those Loki bastards killed my father. I deserve a chance to lay his ghost to rest."

"By avenging him?"

"By doing my part to make certain it doesn't happen again—somewhere else."

She seemed to have all the right answers. *But it takes a lot more than that*, Ripley thought.

It took a love of mankind so blindingly brilliant that it could make the dark corners seem bright. Call had that love. So did Johner, in his twisted way.

*And Angie? Does she have it?* Ripley regarded her. *Could be.*

"I'm going to take this uncomfortable silence as a yes," Angie told her. "So is there a secret handshake or something?"

"Secrets," Ripley conceded, "but no handshake." She tilted her head as she considered the botanist. "How are you with propulsion systems?"

"Lousy," said Angie. "But I can learn. Any of my colleagues would back me up on that."

*If they were still alive, Ripley thought.*

*And they might be, if I hadn't failed them. As I've failed so many others.* Newt, Hicks, Dillon, Distephano, Rama ... the list was already longer than she could stand.

So why would she consider taking on a new piece of meat—one that would sooner or later join the others in oblivion? *I would have to be insane.*

Or needful. She couldn't do the job by herself, and it was too important to leave undone. So as much as she hated the idea, she had to make sacrifices.

"Your colleagues," she said pointedly, "hardly know you. If I were you, I'd do my best to change that."

Angie smiled a little. "Thanks."

Ripley returned her attention to the dog. "Thank me after you've been at this a while."

Angie didn't say anything else. She just left the cargo bay, a new and unexpected life opening ahead of her.

*If a brief one, Ripley couldn't help adding.*

But there would be some satisfaction in it first. She was pretty certain of that. They would see some victories in their shadow war.

Ripley wondered what Loki would think when it discovered what happened in the Domes. How would it explain to the Mala'kak that their deal had unexpectedly gone sour—that their alien egg hadn't produced the desired result?

One thing was certain: the *Betty* had become too big a pest to be ignored. When Loki came after Ripley and her crew again, it wouldn't be with a lousy little attack vessel.

It would be with something big and powerful. Something no cargo hauler in her right mind would go up against.

Ripley smiled to herself, feeling the darkness slide restlessly within her. *Let them come.*

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# A L I E N S <sup>TM</sup>

**BOOK II**

**DNA WAR**

**DIANE CAREY**



# 1

“The damned thing knows how to fly!”

“Throw your coat over it, Rory!”

“I’m no zoologist. Throw your own coat!”

I was caught in a cyclone with a hellhound. Caught in darkness as if we were wrapped in a red cloak. Mechanical thunder, bumping and falling, the din of conflict—we were having a visitation from the gods of panic.

Clark could yell all he wanted. I was diving under the table. When I got there, the magnetologist was already taking up the space. I had to pitch myself backward behind the galley hatch. Normally I’m pretty hard to scare, but I’d never seen anything this horrifying in my whole life.

Warning lights cast patches of red and yellow on the stark exposed piping and caseless electrical and magnetic conduits, and turned human faces into tribal masks. Were the strobing lights really supposed to help? The ship was panicking for its life.

Everything on this container ship was weird to me, but this moment was the weirdest so far. This bloodcurdling scarecrow was strafing us while the crew barked back and forth about losing

altitude and crashing into the planet—not the kind of thing you want to hear when you’ve been asked to come along on a nice quiet ride. The thrusters screamed in our ears, fighting outside forces they were never built to fight. We were almost ready to settle into orbit when this monstrosity broke out and scared the pilot by landing in his hair. He went sideways and so did the ship.

The thing with wings twisted in the air over the table and flew straight at me. Instinctively I blocked it with my arms as wide black wings flayed my head and hands. Then it got caught for a hideous moment between me and the metal galley door. In a panic, it throttled me with its wings before flapping up and out over the top of the door. I swear it turned inside out and flew backward, laws of physics be damned. I didn’t want that monster anywhere near me.

Around us, the ship’s boxy body rattled with mechanical effort and physical battering. Every inch of the hull was under strain as we cut through the upper atmosphere. This wasn’t supposed to be happening. I can almost fly a paper plane, but even a dope like me knows when the thing I’m riding on is in trouble. Good thing I’m not a genius in avionics. I’d’ve really be scared.

“Pocket, open the hangar bay hatch and let this thing fly in there!” Clark called to the first mate. “Pocket, where are you?!”

“He’s underneath me,” Gaylord, the magnetologist, reported from under the table.

“Then you get up and open it!”

“I don’t want that thing in my hair!”

“Atmosphere in forty seconds! Emergency ignition! Barry, emergency ignition! Pocket, crawl out of there right now!”

“It’s on me! Gaylord, get it off me!”

The bosun’s shriek almost matched the creature’s decibel level. “I’m not helping you till I get my six hundred!”

"I won that bet!"

"You tricked me!"

"Where did I get this reputation?"

"Maybe from all the gambling!"

Not being a member of the crew, I had the luxury of ignoring their frantic dialogue during my attempt to melt into the wall. Being the captain and all, Clark was trying to direct the chaos.

"Theo, what's the count?" he called to the first mate.

"Full atmosphere skim if we don't fire the planetaries in thirteen seconds." Somehow Theo's aristocratic English accent gave an elegance to the panic.

"Barry, we're going directly to landing mode!" Clark called. "Blow the relief valves!"

On the helm station above us, Barry, the pilot, shouted, "Keep that thing off me! I can't work!" He was four feet above us on the control balcony, which put him right in the flight path of the hyperkinetic attacker.

The scramble intensified. Forms ducked past me and scratching over me, and somebody stepped on my hand. I guessed the new jolt of movements meant they'd reached a point where they were more scared of getting sucked into the planet without engine control than they were of the weirdie in the air.

"Is there no one to shoot that thing?" the first mate shouted. "Where are the Marines?!"

"I can't do this alone!" Barry called from the helm.

"Gaylord, get up there and help Barry blow that valve—" Clark's voice was drowned out suddenly by a roar of engine surge.

The bursts and spasms of the ship, complicated by the screwball lunatic in the air, made their voices blend together. While the crew argued about monsters and crashing, I found the floor. I crawled

along beside the galley table's bench seat, grumbling, "I hate things with wings . . ."

I heard the hangar bay hatch clang open, but from down here I couldn't see much. I stretched one hand toward the deckbox under the far end of the bench, the box with my travel gear inside. To the chippering of the wild and woolly creature in the air, I forced my fingers into the box and felt around, found my holster, pulled it out, and unclipped it. The high-powered plasma pistol fell into my hand. It was the best money could buy for licensed private enforcement. A badge of honor in its way, folks said. The gel-formed grip fell perfectly into my left hand and was instantly warm, a trademark of the manufacturer, specially made for left-handers.

"Clark," I announced, "I've got my plaz. I can shoot that thing." I forced myself not to shout. Adrenaline would wreck my aim.

"Don't shoot it!" he called back.

Holding the pistol in both hands, I rolled over onto my back and tried to follow the ugly duckling in the air. The thing had no flight pattern at all. It flapped out an erratic tracery and kept doubling back on itself. Every few seconds I caught a glimpse of two huge, shiny, ghoulish black eyes, repugnant little white teeth. It took all my training to remember how to aim at a moving object. Mostly instinct, but y'know. It's not like I'd ever seen anything quite *this* ghoulish before, being a city boy. I'd seen other kinds of ghouls.

The shadow of the first mate, Theo, crossed between me and the monster gargoyles as he made a dive to throw a blanket over it, but he missed. When the shadow cleared, I shimmied out into the middle of the deck.

"Oh, *please* let me shoot it—" I begged.

Clark's voice cut through the confusion. "Don't shoot, Rory. I'm serious!"

“Aw, come on . . . ” I hugged the plasma gun to my chest and put my free arm over my hair just in time to duck.

The ship kicked and took a sudden surge forward, then sputtered and dropped under us, taking our stomachs with it. I recognized the sensations—riding the rapids. The *Vinza* was a heavy vessel, old, tested, and steady. Landing usually went like clockwork. Not today. The wingie thingie had screwed us up by scaring the wits out of our pilot before he had a chance to fire the landing engines. Now we were plunging in without steerage power. And we were still being strafed by a banshee.

“This is pretty damned demoralizing,” I grumbled.

Sometimes a switch goes off in my head telling me to put an end to whatever’s being dished out at me. After the switch flips, if I don’t get control, whatever happens after that is my own fault. So I forced myself to get over the shock of seeing what I was seeing, stood up straight, and fixed my eyes on the screaming meemie in the air. My neck was sore in seconds. I shimmied out of my favorite jacket, custom-made in a fudge-brown leather and exactly the color of my hair. Okay, so it was custom-made for the guy who’d left it at the thrift store where one of my girlfriends found it for pennies on the dollar. So what? I got no pride.

I held the jacket in front of me like a bullfighter’s cape and kept my eyes fixed on the flapper. Fast little freak! It flew along the lower wall supporting the pilot station, turning so its wings spread floor to rail on the wall. With its body flattened to the wall and its nose raised to show the way, its black eyes peered at me from the top of its skull in a horrifying stare. It knew I had become the one to watch —*it knew*.

Suddenly squeamish, I took a tentative step backward. My spine bumped the edge of the open bay hatch. It felt like someone pushing

a weapon into my back and goading me to move forward. The thing was coming. It veered off the corner where the pilot deck wall met the galley wall and tilted its wings just slightly to come straight at me. Around me, Clark and Gaylord, Theo, and Pocket ducked and jumped in their attempt to do their jobs while fearing for their skins. Above us, Barry hunched over his helm, hoping not to get snagged by the hair.

Clark was a brawny guy, tall enough that his enviable auburn thatch barely cleared the headspace of his own ship. He had a semi-permanent bruise from the one strake just outside his own cabin that beamed him in the forehead every time he came out groggy. Now his height betrayed him as the brushfire-beast made a spiral around his head. He lost his cool, flayed fanatically, and somehow shrunk to half his size. “Little mugger!” he blurted.

A stripe of blood appeared on his nose—he’d been raked by a claw. The gargoyle seemed to have the claws pointed at anybody it was flying toward. My head began to swim. The creature was flying fast, but I was moving in slow motion, unable to comply with the erratic flight plan. I was three years old again, trapped in my bedroom in the new house, out of place, unfamiliar, dodging those other creatures circling my room, my bed—

For the first time I wasn’t sleeping in my mother’s room. My first real bed. My first room. Only to find I shared it with a nest of birds. They were only stupid sparrows, but to me, at three—so I still hate things that fly.

I held my ground. Would it attack? Claw my face? I raised the jacket up to my nose, held my breath, waited for the strike. The creature’s body disappeared below my line of vision, which almost stopped my heart.

I felt the furry body brush the jacket. I saw a stretch of black webbing. Summoning power over my disgust, I snapped my arms closed.

A substantial ball of muscle writhed against my sleeves. A leathery wing formed itself to the left side of my head tight as a mask. A claw sunk into my scalp. Revulsion streaked from my scalp to my legs. I choked out my unintelligible opinion and held my face away. Against my body the monster twisted and fought, chittering its protest like a tap dancer's shoes. I dropped back against the galley wall behind the bay hatch door, trapped between the wall and the thing. "I've got it! Land the ship!"

"Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you!" Gaylord percolated at me as he launched his large body to the ladder to the pilot balcony, where Barry battled the forces of nature. Engines that were normally almost silent now howled so loudly that we all had to shout to be heard. What the hell was I doing here? How did Clark Sparren always manage to get the better of my common sense? I was supposed to have a lot of common sense! Training! Judgment! Where was it when I needed it?

Controlling his voice, Clark thundered up the short ladder to the helm balcony. "Is the valve blown?"

"Valve's blown!" Barry reported.

"Gaylord, get Barry some electrical support. Theo, run out the wings."

"Wings, aye!"

"Gaylord, full flush in ten seconds," Clark called out. "Theo, get those wings out!"

"They're answering."

A drumming airy *shhhhhhtk* announced the deployment of the retractable wings, fins, and stabilizers. The roaring and shuddering

of the ship's body began to level off.

"Ignition in five seconds!" Clark called out. "Five . . . four . . ."

From the helm, Barry ducked at a flash of light and squawked, "Where's that thing?"

"Steer the ship!" Clark ordered. "Two! . . . One! Ignition!"

The vibrations under my feet grew to a steady quick pulse like a snare drummer increasing the marching pace. The mechanical whining eased down to a loud but consistent buzz. Atmospheric engines working, wings out—what else could go wrong to ruin our good save?

Trapped with my own disgusting problem, I sucked air through gritted teeth and held the creature tightly in my jacket, hoping it wasn't crapping on my shoes or biting through to my skin. Clark snapped out orders, keeping his voice down to the absolute volume needed to communicate without causing any more stress. The ship's terrified whine settled to an almost musical hum. The deck found a nearly level footing, still at a slight tilt, and began to feel like a deck with support under it . . . air. All that was left of our near-miss was a faint high-pitched whistle from deep within the engine noise, and in a moment that too was gone. Flashing lights of warning began one by one to wink off.

"Stable," Theo finally reported. "Altitude, eight thousand fifty."

"Shit, we're low!" Gaylord gasped.

"Trimming," Barry huffed out, still shaken. The activity didn't exactly settle down, but became suddenly organized, deliberate as each crewman found his nerves and went after his own job.

"Altitude five thousand," Theo chanted out. "Four thousand . . . thirty-five . . ."

At the same time, Clark ordered, "Run out the stands and levelers. Hurry up."



I felt the creature's body heat through the fabric, only a layer or two away from my own skin. Would it bite through? Was it rabid?

"Keep holding it, Rory," Clark called. "Barry, is that landing vector still good? You still getting beacons or do we have to eye-ball it?"

The pilot's voice was shaky, nerve-racked. He hunched over his controls. "Beacons are still in place." As if he didn't quite believe it, Barry paused and repeated, "Reading landing coordinates. Jesus, that was close."

"Cue the piloting computer and auto-thrusters for centerline adjustment. Let her take herself in."

"A hundred to one!" Pocket called out.

"Not now, hammerhead!" Clark snapped.

It seemed to me that auto-thrust would be an automatic thing, but I'd learned that sometimes even the simplest changes had to be approved by the command officer.

"Auto-thrusters green," Barry said, finally calmer.

"Set your lock-downs at three-two-three," Clark went on procedurally, though from here I could see he was sweating a fountain.

"LDs . . . three-twenty-three," Barry responded.

"Put the list sensors on auto."

"Listing sensors on."

"Secure from manual override."

"Shutting down MO."

"Secure plasma reactors and put 'em on standby. All hands, prepare for landing."

"Clark," I called. "Pardon me—"

"You're doing fine, Rory. You got 'im right where you want him."

"I want him in your shorts!"

If only I'd known *what* I had trapped against my ribs. All I knew right now was that it had teeth and wings. My two evil geniuses. For a few seconds it went suddenly still, which was almost more frightening than when it was squirming—then the squirming started again and slipped lower. I tilted my elbow downward to catch it, expecting a claw to sink into my leg.

Clark artfully ignored me. "Reduce speed one quarter. Cue magnetic bearings and couplers."

From where he stood on the pilot balcony, he had a full view of the sky and atmosphere we were rushing through at what seemed to be too-high speed. The crew didn't seem panicked anymore, so I took their cue and tried to stay calm.

It was crock. My heart hammered the animal pressed against my sternum. I couldn't hide my agitation from it anymore than it could hide its quivering tension from me. It wasn't relaxing. Its struggles hadn't calmed. With every breath I took, the creature flinched and pushed outward against my arms in every possible direction.

"Fire verticals," Clark directed. We were coming in for our landing.

This was the worst moment of landing. I'd only experienced it four times in my life and hated it every time. It was the moment between forward thrust and hovering thrust, a complete change in engineering that had to go flawlessly, or the ship could literally fall out of the sky. The ship gave us that sickening dropping sensation again, as if there weren't enough air to hold it up, but it was just an illusion. We broke to a hover as the high-volume thrusters fired, the most powerful engines in the arsenal of aerospace. Their tremendous roar drowned out Clark's staccato orders, but somehow the crew knew what he was saying and one by one delivered the goods to get the massive ship on the ground. It was a fast process, scary fast, not

like docking a big ocean vessel, because there were only so much power and fuel to hold the bulky ship in the air. Less hovering, less waste of energy.

I sank against the bulkhead, crammed my eyes shut, and clutched my ghastly package, hoping to live and wishing to die.

There was a sharp, loud gush. The ship dropped another five feet out from under me, and I fell to meet it. Then a hard stop . . .

I waited for someone—Clark or Theo—to shout some order. Nothing happened, except the ship landed itself. Solid ground scratched under us. I felt the texture of the surface rumble through the ship and into my feet. Then I realized the final landing process must all be automatic, to keep the thrusters from trying to drive into solid ground or blowing the ship over on its side. Sensors could react a thousand times faster than human hands.

“We’re down,” Barry confirmed. He sounded whipped. Beside him up there, Gaylord’s round, brown face peeked over the railing.

Theo didn’t wait around, but spun twice to scan everything around us, then disappeared into the cargo bay, probably to check on damage. He never stayed in one place for long, I’d noticed. A first mate was a jack-of-all-trades, and Theo’s face, with its goatee and tight brown eyes, popped up everywhere high and low. He had the air of English aristocracy, but he worked like a yeoman. Pocket had told me Theo even had a title, and somewhere an estate, that his father had been knighted, but his family fortune had dwindled and the estate was being used as a hotel for whatever income it could generate. Everybody had a hard-luck story. At least, everybody aboard this ship seemed to.

On the deck, on his knees not far from me, Pocket had both hands clawed into the metal barrier grid that supported the pilot station. He peered at me through wayward strands of straw-colored hair

that had pulled out of the thick ponytail. "Hundred to one," he murmured.

"Good job, everybody," Clark said with a sigh. "Let's not do that anymore for the rest of our lives, eh?"

The crew rewarded him with grunts and nods.

"Let's hear it for Rory!" Pocket panted out.

Applause broke out with a little weak cheering. "Yay, Rory!" Gaylord wheezed.

"Nice going," Theo said, and at the same time, Barry offered, "Touchdown, man."

"Yeah, good going," Clark said. "You got it."

"I've got it," I gagged. "Now . . . will somebody please tell me *what* I've got?"

"Just stay there a second."

"Somehow this is *your* fault."

"Let's do the housekeeping," he went on to his crew. "Where's Theo? Wasn't he here?"

"He went into the bay," I choked.

"Okay, everybody, do your lock-downs and secure from motive power. Check the throttle bearings and flat-line the Cobb-coils. Tell Theo to down-flow the inhibitors and assign somebody to check for crazing. I don't want any hairline breaks causing stresses when we launch. Have Gary and Mark look at the zinc disks and the loading transmission. Tell Kip to secure the galley. Gaylord, do a complete magnetological diagnostic on all systems. Barry, re-set the relief valves, and Pocket, check the cargo for damage and deployability. Get somebody to lube the king posts, safety winches, and lifting gear. I'll give you till thirteen-thirty to get me reports of stability and readiness. And somebody go see how badly we shook up the Marines."

"Hope we didn't scare 'em," Pocket commented as he got to his feet.

For the first time in several minutes, Clark's eyes fell on me. Pretty soon they were all looking at me and my . . . package.

Here I was, sucking air in little gulps, lips curling, both legs braced, knees bent, and my spine pressed against the hatch. I held perfectly still with my arms clamped and knees tight around the squirming package inside my coat.

From my left periphery, the ship's medical intern slipped toward me. She was a short, round girl with shoulder-length blonde hair and manly features, but enormous sweet blue eyes. She always seemed to be interested in talking to me during the awake parts of the trip.

"Something you need to tell us, Bonnie?" I asked through my teeth.

She raised her hands, but didn't touch me or my jacket yet. "Don't smother her, okay? Let her have some air?"

"What is digging its way through my undershirt on its way to my chest hair?"

She turned pink in the face. "Can I just take her?"

"Her'?"

She gathered the squirming bundle out of my arms and coiled her own arms around it. "Thanks," she murmured. "See ya."

"Bonnie!" Clark snapped.

"Bye." She tried to push behind me toward the hatch with her bundle.

Clark dropped down the short ladder and only had to make a half turn to end up blocking her way. "Is that yours?"

"Well . . ."

"Why do you have a steroidal mouse aboard this ship?"

The girl hid behind a hank of blonde hair that had fallen in her face. "You always encourage us to bring creature comforts with us —"

"Not *actual* creatures, you idiot. Is this where my papayas have been disappearing to?"

Bonnie shifted from foot to foot. "Um . . . we ran out of apples. You know, you didn't have to panic. She was just looking for a place to land. She's hand-raised by humans, and if somebody had just stuck your arm straight out like this, she'd have just landed on you perfectly."

"Not on me," I grumbled.

We flinched as the creature jolted in Bonnie's arms and its head popped out of the folds of my jacket. A triangular head, big black eyes and a little nose, ruffled fur and little tiny black hands trying to pull it out of the jacket. Damned if it didn't look like a Pomeranian.

Keeping my newly claimed distance, I asked, "What *is* that?"

"Haven't you ever seen a flying fox?" she asked.

"That's no fox."

"Isn't it obviously a . . ."

Clark growled, "A flipping giant *bat*."

He suddenly noticed that everybody was standing around us, peering at the critter, and nobody was jumping to do all those lock-ups and coil-things and up-downs.

"Hey, is this a show?" he said. "Get cracking!"

Like ripples in a pond, they dispersed. Bonnie would've gone too, except Clark blocked her way intentionally.

"A bat . . ." I found my feet and put a step between me and Bonnie's bundle. "What's it doing out in space with us?"

"Good question." Clark zeroed in on Bonnie. "Well?"

She blushed. "Well . . . who could I get to take him while I'm in space for so long? Isn't it pretty good that he never gets out of my cabin?"

"He never gets out?" he mocked. "Where'd you get that thing?"

"Remember that cute guy who hitched from the Doyle-Gray system on the last voyage? I fused his broken wrist?"

"That greasy-haired punk who liked you?"

"He has a lot of exotic animals, y'know, that he rescued from stupid people who think they make good pets? He had this baby flying fox, and it was too young and all, and what was I supposed to do?"

"Are you telling me you're this bat's mama?"

"She's kinda cute, isn't she?"

"Girl, blow this thing out the airlock!"

"You don't really want to kill her! Did she really do anything so wrong? Does she take up that much space?"

"Give or take the five-foot wingspan," I commented.

"Four fee—hee—hee—"" Bonnie started to cry and in seconds was sobbing inconsolably. She was such a studious and competent medic, hardly making a peep most of the time, that it seemed odd to find out she was really a girl. She hugged her bat, which put its little curiously human black hand on her cheek as if to comfort her.

"It's not a Chihuahua," Clark told her. "Girl, do you have to be such a turkey? Was that creepy thing in the cryotube with you?"

She nodded.

The fox bat squirmed again and this time flopped out an entire wing—a long segmented black leathery membrane that hugged my jacket's folds as Bonnie tried to keep control. I noticed her big blue eyes—Bonnie's, not the bat's—ranging to meet mine whenever she wasn't obliged to be looking at her captain's.

"Do you want your coat back?" she offered tentatively, and started to pick at her bundle.

I protested, "Uh . . . maybe you should just keep it . . ."

"Don't worry. Butterball doesn't have fleas or anything."

"Fleas . . ." My stomach churned as she disengaged the fox bat from my jacket, claw by claw and fold by fold.

"No, no, she's been completely decontaminated, just like everything aboard. I did it myself."

"You'd have to. 'Butterball'?"

Gaylord and Pocket appeared on either side of Clark to have a look at the monster we'd just conquered. With Gaylord hiding behind him, Pocket screwed up his face. "What's this? How'd it get into the salon?"

Bonnie shot back, "I asked you not to go in my cabin, Pocket!"

"You didn't inform me your cabin was Pandora's box! We log the magnetic coil readouts before we can land. They're in your cabin!"

Gaylord piped up with, "I had a stroke when this came flying out!"

She spun to glare at him. "Next time, stay *out*."

"I guess you guys should ask first before you go in the infirmary," Clark supported.

"Who's gonna check the feeds?" Gaylord asked.

Clark shrugged. "I'll check 'em."

"You're the captain!" Pocket protested. "If you do our jobs, who's gonna do your job?"

"Rory here'll do it."

"Yeah. Rory. Right." Annoyed and exhausted, Pocket slipped through the main hatch to get back to doing what should've been the work of a normal landing sequence. Gaylord punished Bonnie with



one more disturbed glare before he too stepped out into the main bay.

I barely managed to keep my pistol down as Bonnie dropped my jacket and the fox-faced bat flipped over to hang from her arm as if she were a tree branch. It seemed content to hang from Bonnie's wrist with its bony hind claws firmly gripping the neoprene of her service tunic's protective sleeves. In the air it had spread its wings wider than the mess table was long. Now it coiled those wings around its body, just like the vampires in the stories, and stared at me and Clark with its doggie eyes.

Clark glowered at it, then again at Bonnie. "Take it away. Put it away. Lock it up. I don't want to see it again. From now on and for the rest of its life, you find some wicked witch to baby-sit that thing."

"I promise," Bonnie said. She raised her arm, straining from the not-inconsiderable weight of the bat. "She's friendly. She's not wild at all. See?"

She offered me a chance to—what, pet the thing?

I shrank back. "I hate things that fly."

"What? Like bluebirds and butterflies?"

"If they fly and they bite, I hate 'em."

"But she's cute just hanging here, isn't she? Admit it."

"Yeah, she's adorable," Clark interrupted. "I don't want to see one drop of guano on this ship, you got that?"

Without another word, Bonnie ducked through the aft hatch, heading toward the area where our bunks were laid out in little one-person compartments. Clark drew a long breath and took a moment to check his palm-link unit to the ship's systems. Things must be okay now despite the close call, because he squinted, nodded, and

pocketed the device in his vest pocket. Then he looked at me, burying a hint of embarrassment.

I slumped back to sit on the edge of the mess table. "Long, quiet break in space, you said. Milk run, you said."

"Clam up, I said." He stepped past me to a comtech panel, one of many throughout the ship that allowed for almost total instant access to the ship's systems. He'd told me once before that, if necessary, one person could run the whole ship. Not maintain it, but run it for a while.

He spoke into the panel. "Official log access, code X1. Specialty Spacefaring Container Vessel *Vinza*, PlanCom Contract Seven-seven-four. Planet Rosamond 6 achieved, July 14, thirteen hundred hours, ten minutes, ah . . . four seconds. Safe landing on predetermined coordinates, no incidents. Clark Sparren, Master, authorization SP405. Log, secure, and send."

"Log secure," the computer responded. "*Sending voyage report now. Reporting to Nebula Habitation Division, PlanCom, Incorporated, Cincinnati, Ohio. Thank you and have a pleasant watch.*"

"Thanks." Clark punched a pattern on the control panel, then said, "Theo, put up all the scanners and scout the landscape. We'll have a look around before we go out."

"On it," Theo answered from somewhere in the ship.

"I love getting to this moment," Clark commented. "Didn't expect it to be so weird, though."

"No incidents," I echoed.

"Quit repeating what I say."

"That was the most hideous thing I've ever seen, and I'm old."

"You're twenty-eight, Moses."

"Old enough to know what I want and young enough to get it." I wiped the sweat off my cheek. At least, I hoped it was just sweat.

“Why wouldn’t you let me shoot it?”

“Because we don’t need a hole in the ship. You were aiming at an outer wall.”

Now that he said it, I felt stupid for not thinking of that.

Clark heaved a clearing sigh and shrugged off the morning’s unsavory action. “Nice way to start the day. Atmosphere scratch and a wild bat chase, all before breakfast. We get a pass for the rest of the month. Everything easy from now on.”

I eyed him in a way we both recognized. “You don’t know my mother. This isn’t Maid Marian we’re talking about.”

He waved a hand. “Like it or not, tomorrow we’ll be on our way back to Earth, with your mom and all her people tucked safely away in our ride-alongs.”

“Give her a hobby. Put the bat in with her.”

“Come with me.”

He led the way through the bay hatch into the ship’s wide-mouthed hangar bay. The bay—I’d been told on my orientation tour—was an open area built to carry shipping containers of almost any configuration. The ship was thick-bodied, massive, and utilitarian, with length almost proportional to its height. Folding bulkheads could be arranged to accommodate different kinds of cargo. I’d seen it done, and what a sight it was to watch a bay the size of a football field suddenly reconfigure itself at the push of a button.

There was no artistry in the bay, as in some passenger parts of the ship that indulged the aesthetics. Nothing here appealed to the eye, except to the trained industrial eye which might appreciate it. I think the crew appreciated it plenty. Everything was black, gray, and white, metallic colors, except for brightly painted rotating gantry cranes which were encoded red, yellow, green, blue, or purple for quick identification. Those looked like a kids’ swingset. During the

two months before cryo, I'd mostly followed Pocket around the ship and helped him, just to keep busy and not give anybody the idea that I was just watching. At first I'd followed Clark around while he did his captain stuff, but I always felt like an odd sock. When I followed Pocket, there were things I could do. I'm a great stooge. Bosuns always needed stooges. I could hold the ends of things, flip switches, ratchet something up, drive something, carry the other end, open hatches and close boxes, run and get things, and watch in admiration. Pocket and I seemed to be mutually useful; he was a loner who didn't like to ask for help but was glad to have it. We didn't chit-chat, yet we communicated great. I had a knack for anticipating what he needed, and I knew when to "stand by." When other crewmen came past us, doing their crewy work or driving the body-hugging loaders, I would be "working" too—either actually doing, holding, or ratcheting, or I would be "standing by" for Pocket. What the hell, half of success is identity, right?

Wishing I could be with Pocket instead, I followed Clark along the centerline bulkhead, a wall that ran the whole length of the bay. Around us the crew climbed, crawled, and rappelled around the stacked cargo containers. Clark hurried through without a glance at his crew. Perhaps that was a practiced habit, to keep them concentrating on their work and not on his watching them do their work.

We hurried along in the man-made pathway between stacked yellow containers, each as big as a garage and marked with the PlanCom logo, the silhouette of a cowboy on his mustang, lassoing a planet. I almost had to jog to keep up with him. He was serious about keeping to that tight schedule. His boots made a deliberate *skup-skup-skup* sound on the deck coated with recycled hard rubber, all the way to the engine room, where he finally stopped. The engine

room housed the magnetic field propulsion units and the plasma reaction chambers. I only remembered that because the door said, “MAG FIELD PROP/P.R. CHAMBER—CREW ONLY” and I had to walk past it to get to the aft head. I wasn’t crew, so I never went in there.

Never? Sounded like I’d been aboard a year. Actually, I’d spent a whole two months awake and fifteen months asleep.

Clark gazed up at the massive containers. “These boxes make me nervous just walking by. The idea of malfunctions and all. Nobody’s perfect—and no automated system is foolproof. If the containment’s security system went bad, we’d all be eradicated in about eighty seconds.”

Plumbing for reassurance, I commented, “Well, sometimes you just have to put your life in somebody else’s hands, right?”

He didn’t respond. He drew a breath and sighed it out, then stepped to the nearest giant green container, gazed the fourteen feet up to the top, then back to the high-security lock patch. First, both his thumbs were required for a print scan. At first the small screen showed a red light of activation and warning. Any further tampering could result in a sharp electrical stun if the patch didn’t recognize the person doing the decoding of its program.

I sidled back, hoping I was out of range, but not far enough to let him know I was nervous. At least he’d had the guts to admit he was scared. Kinda made me ashamed.

The red light turned orange, with a green chevron in the middle. Clark leaned forward and presented his left eye for a retinal identification. The light turned yellow. The green chevron remained. Clark pulled out the MRI remote and pressed it to his left temple. A brain scan completed the security code. The yellow lights went away

and the green chevron began to flash, overlaid with the word CAUTION.

Caution . . . caution . . . caution . . .

The giant loading door panels on the container began to repeal themselves, panel by panel, starting in the middle. The container was opening. Now nothing stood between the two of us and the nightmare inside.

I took another step back.

## 2

The massive door panels clunked one under the other, like curtain blinds moving slowly apart to reveal the sunrise. I bumped backward against the container behind me and spread my arms. “God a’mighty . . .”

There was no sunrise inside the giant container. Nothing so encouraging. We stood together, Clark a little taller and bulkier than myself, yet we were both suddenly very small. My chest tightened, my heart thudding as I looked up at a gleaming phalanx of robots. Like the Confederate line at Seminary Ridge, the mechanized regiment bristled with spines and explosive-tipped barbs, thousand-eyed sensors and all the things any human kid recognizes as “do not touch.” Each of dozens just in this box alone, was shaped like a bullet cartridge with a round helmet. The helmet was embedded with spines, barbs, and feelers. There was no front, back, or sides, and each had six folded legs, usable in any combination. They could move in any direction. And they fired those poison-filled darts by sensors. The darts were supersonic. Once targeted, there was no getting out of the way. I’d seen smaller versions for urban warfare,

but nothing this bulky and over-armed. Even standing there in repose, the machines broadcast aggression. They were scary as hell.

"They're something, aren't they?" Clark scanned the dangerous rank. The lights of the cargo bay reflected from the gleaming bodies of the robot soldiers, fell back upon his all-too-human face and changed his eyes to metallic disks. "Every one of them could kill a small town. They're loaded with sensors programmed to seek out any life form whose DNA doesn't match the planet. Those barbs are actually percussion hypodermics. Their bodies are canisters loaded with poison deadly to anything that's not native here. All you have to do is get too close, and *jab*. If I don't do this right, we'll kill ourselves and all those geeks out there. The poison-packers only have two targets—the aliens that have hijacked this planet, and us. Everything else on the planet will be spared."

I dredged up my voice. "How . . . how . . . many . . ."

Lost it again.

Clark also was subdued. "There are five hundred in every container, and I've got ninety containers."

His voice was laden with awe and responsibility. This was the most important thing Clark had ever done, or would ever do in his life, and it showed in his expression. His features, normally smooth, rosy, and carefree, were lined, hardened, and gray. We stood together in a profound hush.

My whole body snapped when something moved beside me. The first mate, Theo, had come up on me from the side. The kind of person who doesn't miss much and spends his life chasing details while understanding big pictures, Theo stared up at the poison-packers.

"Damn us all," he murmured. "So that's what they look like . . ."



Only then did I realize they hadn't surveyed their cargo before this. Probably the containers had been delivered fully loaded and secure from the security company contracted by PlanCom. Made sense—what if there were some kind of mistake? Something as simple as a bat loose on the planet had almost caused a crash. Had imaginings of deadly errors chiseled away at the crew's consciences? Or were they just doing a job? I didn't really know them well enough to say. I knew Clark would have found some way to justify the progress, to take this supertechnology and put it to use he saw as good. Bonnie might worry about little animals that got in the way. Gaylord would probably hide till it was over.

For me, I was just intimidated. Seemed smart at the moment.

"It's okay," Clark said. "They're deactivated right now. I have to arm them."

He tapped a "warm up" code into the panel, which would start the download program, which was communicable to all the other containers.

"What activates them?" I choked out.

"I do," Clark said. "There's a series of fail-safes. Theo and I are the only ones who can deploy them. I know all the codes, Theo knows half. If I'm incapacitated, Theo has to activate his own series of fail-safes on the eyes-only computer in my cabin, then get the deployment fail-safes. It's not like pushing a button."

He pushed a button and the first bank of robots began to light and flash, their whirring scanners drawing energy. I stepped back more, and realized as I did that stepped back wouldn't matter a whit to these things. They'd follow, they'd hunt, and they'd never give up.

"Once they're deployed and out of the containers, there's no turning back," Clark said. "They can't be recalled till they completely exhaust themselves and account for every square inch of

the planet. They even go under water. Can you imagine the ocean floor haunted by these things?"

"Good day for a swim," I managed. "What happens if you're both incapacitated?"

"It gets harder after that," Clark admitted. He shook himself free of the hypnotic effect. "Okay—let's close this up for now. I don't want the whole crew standing here staring like sheep at a corn show."

He activated the controls and in a few moments the accordion doors were grinding shut one after the other, until they came together in the middle of the huge container. Finally the last two doors met, clacked, locked, and fell hauntingly silent. The poison-packers were locked away in their box once again, but we held in our minds the picture of their helmeted blue-gray bodies, standing there like twitching draft horses, waiting for the bell to summon them to pull their enormous load.

Clark caught sight of his first mate checking the auto-diagnostics of each container, and ordered, "Theo, call all hands."

Theo clicked the shipwide com system on his personal comtech. "All hands, muster amidships." His call echoed slightly through the big bay.

One by one, the crew began to appear through hatches in the deck and bulkheads, and on walkways above.

There was the pilot, Barry, and the coxun, Mark, who was also a mechanic of a fairly technical order. Gaylord, the magnetologist, and Wade, an electrical specialist. Clark, of course, and Bonnie, the medic. Soon Axell, the squirrely computer guy, appeared with Pocket, who was in charge of generally keeping the inside of the ship in order and the cargo secure. Loading and unloading, that sort of thing. And there was Theo, the first mate, who was also an engineer.

Finally Kip Singleton ducked his completely hairless head through the galley hatch. He was the cook who talked to himself and who practically ran the place. He shaved his head every day, because he had a paranoia about getting hair into the food. The crew liked to tease him about his eyebrows, and Pocket was taking bets about how soon it would get to Kip and the cook would shave them off.

I didn't know them well and probably never would. We'd been fifteen months in cryosleep together, which gets you stiff legs and bizarre dreams, but nobody to stand at your wedding. Mostly I hung around Clark or Pocket and sometimes Bonnie, who liked to talk to me about my least favorite subject: my famous mother. I didn't like that topic of conversation, but Bonnie was sweet and star-struck and I didn't have the heart to brush her off. Or tell her the truth about my mother.

Everyone visibly stiffened when the Colonial Marine squad joined us. There were four men and one woman, specially trained for space missions, and they cut quite a swath through the mismatched ship's crew. The soldiers wore crisp matching field uniforms with special body-hugging padding in a head-to-toe brick-red color. Red wasn't the kind of color soldiers usually wore for field work on Earth, so they looked alien in their own way. Then again, they were entering an alien environment. This was my first clue that the planet's surface out there must be red.

Soon they were all here, and Bonnie was the last to arrive, *sans* her moonstruck mouse.

The whole mission was only going to take a matter of hours, not days, then another fifteen months in cryo to get back to Earth. By the time we got back, babies would be toddlers, stocks would have surged and plunged, and the multiple-murder case I'd pursued for

three years would've become history, along with me. The precinct had given me the time off and counted it only as two weeks vacation.

This wasn't the kind of place where anybody in his right mind wanted to stay more than a few hours, and only if necessary. I'd seen the reports of the creatures we were here to destroy. I'd read the account, what few existed. Somehow these animals managed to take perfectly secure operations and skilled field personnel and turn them into shredded wheat in remarkably short time.

"Okay, this is the drill," Clark began, falling easily into "captain" mode. He was a long-distance hauler and the long calm ride was his nature as well as his job. "We are now on the planet's surface. Nobody leaves the ship without permission, you all know that. Permission can only be given by myself or Theo. Can I have a screen?"

Theo tapped his hand-held link to the ship's systems, and a screen whined right down out of a slot in the structure of the walkway above us. I guess they were all over the place on a ship like this.

I hunched my shoulders, ready to see a dark and ugly landscape overrun by wickedness, creatures more malignancy than life, a whole new kind of black plague.

The screen activated, giving us a picture of the immediate area around the ship, outside on this remote planet called Rosamond. The ship's scanners moved slowly across the land.

I squinted, looking for hazards and horrors.

Instead, around us was a peaceful alien landscape, with settled black pathways running between red pillars of various diameter that might be a forest, or might be a cathedral. Where was the pestilence? Where was the befoulment?

Clark stepped to the screen, which was as wide as his arm was long and gave us all a good view of whatever the *Vinza's* visual trackers could see, based on line-of-sight.

"The scientists' camp is inside the ship's automatic protection perimeter. Here you can see it just down about a half-kilometer from where we've landed."

He stood to the side of the screen and pointed at a humpy little village of pre-fab protective living quarters, the kind that deployed themselves, drilled themselves into the ground for anchorage, and had been tested in every possible land environment on Earth, including the Gobi desert and the Antarctic shelf. Shaped like upside-down bowls and ribbed with hyperflexion scissor-arches, they were as close to impervious to outside forces as was humanly possible to construct with current science. Once locked down, if the users were careful, no known animal could break in, including humans.

There was no one walking around out there, nobody coming out of the hyperflex huts to meet us. Pretty strange, after so many months in isolation. I'd have expected a welcoming committee. Not a soul came forward. "I don't see any movement," Theo commented. "No aliens . . ."

"No anybody, it looks like," Clark confirmed. "If there were aliens, the ship's auto-defense would be firing right now. So we can assume it's safe out there for an initial scouting."

I noticed that the settlement huts were colored the same as the landscape—my anticipated brick-red with black and yellow horizontal streaks. So somebody had been thinking ahead, because all the huts were pre-fabricated on Earth.

"Our orders are, first, to remove and, second, to destroy," Clark went on. "We stabilize our primary site, which means the ship and

the immediate hundred yards in any direction, we do *not* have any more surprises—” The crew chuckled and rolled their eyes, still nerve-racked. “We probe out with our pre-assigned landing party, you know who you are, we collect these science geeks, Rory counts heads, and we secure them inside the *Vinza*. Rory has mug shots and I.D. codings for all these people and it’ll be up to us to help him account for them. The whole operation shouldn’t take more than maybe ten hours. Then we deploy the automated platoon of poison-packers and we fly back home while they do their job for the next eleven and a half months, but that’s somebody else’s problem, which makes me real happy.”

“Question,” Gaylord interrupted. “Are there forty-two or fifty-two of these people? I’m getting conflicting reports.”

“Rory, why don’t you answer that.”

I straightened up. I hadn’t expected any questions directed at me. “There are fifty-two of them, if they’re all still alive. They’re all science-oriented, specialists and interns, students, all hand-picked by my mother for this mission. They shouldn’t give us any resistance.”

“How can we evac fifty-two people and all their gear in ten hours?”

“Because we’re not taking their gear,” I said. “We’re just taking them and the clothes they’re wearing and any babies they might’ve had while they were here. Which, if they’re smart, will be none.”

“Will they go for this?” Bonnie asked.

“They’ll have to,” Clark said. “After the planet’s sterilized, their gear and all their data will be retrieved in a calm manner, on a clean planet which will be under perfect control.”

“What if they don’t want to leave their stuff here?”

“Nobody asked them.”

Silence fell, at least for a few long moments.

Finally Theo broke the tension. "How much do we know about these bug-things?"

Clark shrugged. "Big, ugly, gooey, fast, mean, aggressive, and sneaky."

"Lawyers," I grumbled.

An unexpected ripple of laughter made me suddenly self-conscious. I was a stranger here. Their reaction surprised me, made me uneasy. I froze in place, not wanting to blow it. I didn't need them to like me. I needed them to accept me for the duration.

"We're not sticking around to get fleeced," Clark went on. "The whole evac-deploy shouldn't extend past midnight. This seems real simple and it should be. We're going down in daylight just after dawn, which is the safest time. Have all of you done your homework on these aliens we're going to be *scrupulously* avoiding?"

Everybody nodded. I watched them, their twitches, their eye movements, the sulky postures. They hadn't all reviewed the tapes like they were supposed to. Everyone one of their faces looked like a mug shot.

"We have the Marines to take care of us," Clark went on, "and Rory to help corral his mother, who runs this camp down here. You've all heard of Jocasta Malvaux. Real powerful scientist, hobnobs in high circles. Once she complies, they'll all fall into place. After that, we deploy the poison-packers and split. Colonel MacCormac, you got anything to add?"

The Marine commander, a cylinder with no hair and powder-blue eyes like an Alaskan dog, stepped forward. His voice was fairly high for a man, and had a surprising gentility about it, but that was the only soft thing about him and I didn't buy it for a cover. "Contamination resistance is number one," he said. "This ship and the surrounding area remains under heavy guard and twelve-point

automatic surveillance the whole time. The ship's auto-defense will protect us if we don't make any mistakes. Nothing sneaks aboard. One egg can destroy a ship. It's happened before. That's why we're evacuating and leaving the robotic poison-packers to hunt down every last one of these bastards."

"Do we know what they eat?" Bonnie asked. "I mean, do they eat . . . us?"

"There's no record that they eat humans," Clark said. "We don't know what they consume. Maybe nothing."

"Um . . ."

Everyone waited, but Bonnie suddenly got shy.

"Go ahead, girl," Clark said. "Speak up."

She flushed in the cheeks, but met the challenge. "Creatures that big and active have to consume something. They're too thin and bony to store much."

"Sounds fragile," Gaylord commented.

"I wouldn't bet on that," MacCormac warned. "Making assumptions like that is what got a whole squad of Colonial Marines slaughtered."

I looked at the thick-necked, strong, bull-like man and at his other seven human tanks, trying to imagine what could get past them. I was suddenly glad none of them had been in the galley when the fox bat broke free, given that shoot-through-the-ship thing and all. I could only guess that was why they weren't allowed to carry projectile weapons while the ship was in space. Not that they weren't armed anyway, with nerve neutralizers and shockers and just plain blades.

Suddenly I felt foolish for pulling my plasma pistol out of storage and forgetting why it was put away in the first place. I'd lost my cool. In hindsight, I was embarrassed about that.



MacCormac unclipped an unassuming blue cylinder from his belt and held it up. "This is a canister of base. Anybody who's ever worked in a kitchen knows that dumping baking soda on acid will neutralize the acid. These animals have been known to spit or spray acid if their bodies get ruptured. Everybody in the landing party will carry a canister of base. If any acid gets on you or the person next to you, spray this on him. It'll cut the effect till we can get medical treatment. Miss Bardolf here has been trained for treating acid burns."

Bonnie didn't look anywhere near as confident in her skills as MacCormac wanted us to believe. Her wide blue eyes batted around uneasily at us as if she were hoping nobody quizzed her.

Before those thoughts solidified too much, Clark asked, "Colonel, would you please give us a test firing of the auto-protection system?"

"Yes, sir." MacCormac did a sharp right turn to a fancy-ass control station with about a thousand little touch-plates, stations of which I happened to know there were only six on the entire ship. Executed in a bright, polished, yellow metallic, these "gold cores" were total-system access, and those who knew the right things could do almost anything from them. If the helm area or any other critical area ended up contaminated or depressurized, the ship could even be launched, steered, landed, loaded, and unloaded from any of the gold cores. Now MacCormac used the system to cause a deep rumbling in the body of the ship. Energy flowed from the otherwise recumbent magnetic reaction chambers and popped out some kind of deployment array high over our heads, on the outer shell of the *Vinza*.

On the screen, the view of the landscape and the camp huts turned a sharp, disturbing blue-green. An electronic buzz sent us all

grabbing for our ears, then ended in a hard *snap*. Then the blue-green color faded back to the natural golden crunch of the planet.

"That's a field of bubble pellets carrying charged waves," MacCormac said. "It won't kill humans, but you'll be plenty bruised after that kind of punch. If you get caught in a volley, move *toward* the ship. The charges are most powerful at the widest perimeter."

"It won't kill humans?" Bonnie asked.

"But it's DNA-coded to cook anything that isn't human over the weight of five pounds," the colonel said. "Hopefully we won't be here long enough to charbroil any native herds of cattle or whatever lives here."

Bonnie looked worried. "Five pounds . . . you mean ordinary innocent animals can just wander in and get killed?"

"Yes, ma'am, that's right. We had to set the weight limit to account for certain growth levels of the creatures we're avoiding. We won't be here long enough to do much damage. As long as we don't dump anything that attracts the local fauna—"

"We're not going to be down there long enough for any engagements," Clark said before anybody got the same thoughts Bonnie was having. "We'll go down in broad daylight. We're going to keep as tightly to our schedule as possible. We'll be gone before dusk, and the alien infestation'll be neutralized before any other human being ever sets foot back on the planet. These critters adapt fast, so I've got the latest formulation of the pesticide aboard, loaded onto the PPs, programmed to go after any species that's not DNA matched to the planet, leaving every other species alone. Dead aliens, healthy planet." He glanced around, making eye contact with each of the crew, then nodded. "Deploy, y'all."

As the crew moved away from Clark, I moved toward him and in a moment we were as good as alone in the middle of the bay and its

cargo of enormous rectangular green containers.

"My mother's not going to go along with this," I said.

His expression didn't change, but his eyes got a little twinkle of trouble. "Then we'd better not tell her we used her research to come up with the current formulation."

"Yeah . . . let's not tell her that," I agreed.

"PlanCom should've sent synthetics in to do this research instead of a bunch of overeducated dweebs."

I shook my head. "Mother's the Dweeb Queen. Dweebs flock to her. PlanCom couldn't get the rights without giving my mother and her team the chance to study here. They wanted to go. She's influential. She wouldn't make the mission happen unless she and her little parade of sycophants were approved for infiltration." I got a chill and squeezed my shoulders.

"What's wrong?" Clark asked.

I looked him square in the eyes. "You keep talking about how easy this is going to be."

"Well, that's my job. A captain's supposed to be able to sound confident even if his shorts are on fire."

"Know anything about this planet? What kind of terrain is out there past what we can see?"

"In this region, rocky, semi-desert part of the year, fairly dry, hot, some plant growth. Livable, breathable, could be better and hopefully will be some day." He paused, musing. "This planet is one in about eight million, Rory. A livable, breathable planet with two oceans, that won't even need much terraforming . . . hell, another decade of atmospheric modification, and humans can move right in. We can actually live on it now, if we don't run marathons. We won't even have to destroy any indigenous species. You know how rare that is in the reachable galaxy?"

"I really don't." Translation: *I really don't care.*

"Get out of Milwaukee once in a while," he said. "A planet the right size, the right distance from a sun, with an atmosphere and a moon . . . hell, it's worth hundreds of trillions just in the arable land. That's not even starting with the mineral rights, the oceanographic advantages, the value in alien botanicals and native fauna for medical advancement . . . it makes you dizzy, all the things we can do with a place like this. Hell, we've found a living planet that won't be hurt at all if we live on it! We can have a second Earth up and running, and not in a hundred years after fortunes are spent on it, either. I'm talking ten, twelve years, if this crew does its job right this week. We got paradise here, except for this infestation we're here to stamp out. We come, we kill, we claim."

"How does this hunter-killer, poison-packer part stay inside the Alien Species Act?" I asked. "My mother and fifteen senators hammered that out. It's even got a subsection called the 'Malvaux Amendment.' It sure doesn't allow for killing off entire species just to get a claim on a planet."

"*Indigenous* species," he corrected. "Read the fine print. These things aren't from here. They're aliens."

"So are we."

He smiled and nodded. "Guess so. You never heard of a range war?"

"Has anybody ever found out where they come from? What they're doing here?"

"Nobody knows. They're cosmic hitchhikers."

I don't like mysteries. Maybe that's what drove me to get into law enforcement. We'd tried to do our homework— me included—but there wasn't much homework to be done. Not much was known about these animals we were here to exterminate. Of course, that

was why my mother and her team were doing their dangerous work—to find out the things nobody knew about these aliens.

Clark shifted on his feet. “If this works out, it’ll be my last mission. I’m sub-contracted for an estimated percentage of the mineral rights in advance. And they estimated high. The crew gets huge bonuses, and I get that, plus a cut of the profits. If it goes lower, I keep my percentage. If it goes higher, I get further dividends. Pal, if this planet works out, I’m set for life. Hey, how often do you get to be a hero and get rich? I can quit peddling bulk for a living, finally make good on that plantation.”

“You and your plantation.”

“Hey, we can do a lot worse than sit in the beautiful southwestern desert and grow guayule and sunflowers, then leave the land to our kids.”

I broke out a little laugh. “What is this ‘we’ shit? We don’t have kids.”

“You need some. A nice chubby wife, and kids.”

“Kids—I can’t handle a bat! Kids.”

I watched him for a moment, and tipped my head critically. “I don’t see you in a Panama hat, sucking on a big cigar and watching your fields grow.”

“Well, you’re gonna, bud. Get used to it.”

“What is it you want to grow? Wahoo?”

“Guayule,” he said, getting the “ee” on the end. “Naturally hypoallergenic latex. Medical applications, space industry, military, transportation, colonization . . . and you’ve always wanted to quit schlepping bad guys and come live with Nancy and me on our rubber farm and help me raise my kids. This is your dream . . . repeat after me. I, Rory Malvaux, dream of rippling fields of latex plants . . .”

“And you, Clark Sparren, are hallucinating.”

He smiled. Caught up in his mental picture, I smiled too. No more Milwaukee-to-Chicago crime corridor? No more dirty streets, crime scenes, and outlines of dead guys? Was I ready to say goodbye to my whole identity? Clark thought I was. Of course, Clark thought I should never have said hello. He liked being in control. Nobody could control the streets.

I thought about these alien animals which would be the hair in our pudding on this trip. “How long have ‘they’ been on this planet?”

“Sometime between the first scouting androids, about eight years ago, and three years ago when the PlanCom returned to stake its claim. Sixty-two advance scouts and settlers were killed before they figured out these were the same monsters we’ve run into before on one of the mining spacelanes. That’s when your mom was brought in to analyze the situation and decided she wanted a stab at research. She’s had her chance, and now we’re calling it quits and taking over. We think we know all we need to know about them for our purposes. We’re not zoologists, y’know.”

Why was I still sweating? I wiped my face with the leather jacket, then remembered it had just had a bat wrapped in it. I needed a few more seconds to get past that.

Clark glanced around to make sure we were out of earshot, or at least interest, of the crew, who were bustling around us the whole time. “I want you to deal with your mother for us. Don’t waste a lot of time discussing her opinion. Discussions give people the wrong idea. No sense opening a carton we know is sour. Just tell her what’s happening and strongly advise her to comply without a fuss.”

“She hates being told what’s happening unless she’s doing the telling.”

He rubbed his shoulder where the bat had driven him into the wall. "Maybe try to appeal to her motherly qualities?"

"She has no motherly qualities."

He grimaced. "You serious?"

"She protected her cubs until I was old enough to pour my own milk. After that, raising myself and my sister were my job. Mother became famous and I became screwed."

"Geez. Sorry."

"Nah."

"There has to be some way to get to her."

Annoyed at the load he was putting on my shoulders, and at myself for allowing him to convince me to come in the first place, I tried to turn away. He caught my sleeve.

He fell quiet for a moment of thought. "How about the leadership instinct? Her people will panic or get scared or confused, y'know, crushed, if she doesn't deliver a positive experience—"

"She's not a Girl Scout, Clark."

"Tough nut to crack, huh?"

"Accent on 'nut.'"

"Yikes. Okay . . . go do like we taught you to suit up and we'll go ahead out there. This won't take long. There's only one ending."

The conversation was over. He was already working his palmtech to do captain things. I was already out of his thoughts, his attention fixed on whatever the little screen was telling him as he cradled it in the palm of his hand and did a thousand things at once. We'd known each other for almost fifteen years and I knew the posture.

He'd done both of us favors by asking me to come along. He needed a legal officer, and I needed a break. I'd just wrapped up a murder investigation, the revenge murder of a fellow officer, his wife, three kids, and their two dogs. I'd jumped from street cop to

plainclothes detective just to pursue the violent snake who'd slaughtered them slowly, starting with the dogs. For three years I chased the bastard across two continents. The idea was to bring him to justice. Instead, I cut his arms off and let him bleed to death. Oops.

The department covered it up. The official story was that the guy's arms were sliced off when he tried to escape across a farm co-op and got caught in a shredder. Nobody had any problem keeping that secret. I'd always been a loner, but the whole department stuck up for me anyway. Go figure. I'd have let me hang for it.

Clark took me out of the media storm by bringing me along on this mission. The P.D. was glad of it—they'd shoved me out the door. The idea was, I guess, that by the time we came back from forty-odd months in space, I'd be yesterday's news. Whether I wanted to be here or not, I had to be, for the good of everybody else.

I watched Clark, standing there in his blue flight suit with the lapel pin of a cloisonné bluebird which his wife had made for him in art class. He kind of looked like a big blue bird with a red crest. I appreciated him for his ability to live a utilitarian life of routine and practicality while still hanging on to universal visions. I couldn't do it. My visions never went past my shoes.

"This might not go the way you want it to," I warned.

He looked at me. "It will."

I stepped closer, to make sure none of the bustling crew around us could hear. "You can have this planet any time you want, but you and your crew don't get your big bonuses without my official certification that's it's clear of human life. If we can't account for every one of those researchers, dead or alive, then I don't sign off on the deployment of your poison platoon. I'm not here to do you a favor. If I don't certify, you don't collect."



I felt like a ghoul, silhouetted from behind by the brighter lights of the loading area, which now was bustling with active crew as Gaylord and Theo directed their preparation for what would come over the next few hours.

Clark squinted in mental discomfort and clearly some disappointment. Maybe he had expected me to bend to the occasion in his favor. If you want rules bent, ask a friend.

“Okay, Sherlock,” he accepted. In the hangar bay light, his blue eyes matched the bluebird pin. “As long as you understand that I’ll do anything I have to do to save this planet for humanity.”

Several bad seconds passed. For this brief period, we didn’t understand each other at all.

I started to turn away while he was still looking at me. After a few steps, though, I turned again and asked, “What did my mother say when PlanCom first told her about the evacuation?”

As if I’d asked him something complicated, he shifted to his other foot. Finally he pressed his lips flat and kind of shrugged.

“Oh . . . not much.”

# 3

Moonset. A strange word for morning.

In the mist-veiled sky, a single green moon was too large for poetry. This planet's idea of daylight was grim. The greenish-yellow sun shone with an angry glaze, offering no comfort the way Earth's sun did. The environment was almost urban. There were so many tall blood-red pillars ranging to the horizon that we might as well have been in a city center with skyscrapers so close together that sunlight couldn't shine in unless the sun were directly overhead. Gauzy white topgrowth coiled and draped from pillar to pillar, high up at the tops, creating a rain forest effect and a world of patchy permanent shadows beneath. It looked something like the decorations I'd seen in a church during a wedding, as if human hands had carefully placed them, then forgotten them to become shredded and stale with time.

Corners, passages, holes, gullies, caves with no visible ends . . . it was a gory red world, redder than a barn, redder than the Grand Canyon, but not the color of blood. Not that kind of red. This landscape of towers, all diameters imaginable from pencil-thin to big as buildings, were a strange glossy red. When my space-dizziness

faded a little and I could blink a clear field of vision, I realized that the columns were not stone at all in the usual sense. In fact they were translucent enough to see through all but the biggest ones. They were like rubies or art glass. The planet was the ultimate in rose-colored glasses.

White veils and red glass towers. No signs of anything alive.

"Where are they?" Pocket asked.

"They're not answering any hails."

"They could be hunkered down. Or maybe their coms quit working."

"They should've still heard the ship land, for Christ's sake."

"Yeah . . ."

While Clark and Gaylord spoke to each other in front of me, I couldn't find it in myself to speak up in this cathedral of red columns. The environment seemed almost holy in its imposing size and oddness.

We were only about ten feet from the ship, and had paused to take some readings and put out some feelers. Despite knowing that the ship would protect us within a certain perimeter, I couldn't settle my stomach. Imagine being on a whole different planet than Earth. I was the living inheritor of a stunning scientific advancement. My nerves danced with appreciation.

"Rory, you coming?"

Clark's imposing form was flanked on one side by MacCormac and on the other by a compact bundle of muscle named Sergeant Berooz. I noted that Clark's red hair disappeared into the red stone pillar behind him, making him appear to have a face without a head on top.

I felt the path floor with my shoe sole. It was spongy moisture underneath but not on top. I stooped down and brought up a

handful of the planet.

"Rory, what's up?" Clark appeared over me. "We can't move ahead without you."

I offered him the sample. "Look at this stuff."

"Gravel. So what?"

"It's not gravel. It's billions of little skeletons."

He leaned closer to study the remains of some kind of small creature, desiccated to its elements, broken by time and . . . by trampling? What had trampled them?

"It's the consistency of tree bark mulch," I said, "but it's all skeletons."

"Skulch," he dubbed. "Yucky."

"Dead's dead," I commented.

He looked around. The surface of the land, everywhere we looked, was frosted with the remains of uncountable trillions of these tiny dead creatures. "Well, don't take it personally. Earth beach sand is basically the same thing, y'know. Little broken up shells and all."

I stood up and dropped the handful, then brushed my hand clean. "Yeah, let's keep telling ourselves that."

He laughed, but not very convincingly.

I reached out and touched one of the glass pillars. It was so narrow that my fingernails touched the heel of my hand, yet the pillar reached up to the same height as those with the girths of office buildings, and I could see a reflection of myself in its polished face. Too bad I wasn't more to reflect. I was the average of averages. Nothing special. Lost in a crowd of two. There was not and never had been anything the slightest bit interesting or striking about me. I had an Everyman face and a shadow of a beard I'd never really been able to grow into anything but a shadow. For a while, I'd tried to

have a mustache, just to set myself apart, but it came in wimpy and I gave up when my fellow officers started calling me “Fuzz.” If anybody was going to call me “Fuzz,” it would be me, and for the right reasons, dang it.

Oh, well, I guess everybody can’t be Clark Gable. Or Clark Sparren, for that matter. Besides, being the average guy, somebody who could get lost in a crowd of three, had helped me quite a bit during my undercover days.

Fifty-odd feet in the air, the skinny, glossy wand reached as high as the others and provided a support for the hat of gauze. I felt as if I were trapped at the bottom of a pencil box. The sun didn’t shine very well down into the pillared landscape, but was always at some angle, creating a constant prism effect of banded light. There were no corners. Everything was curvy and round, bending down or upward, dipping and swirling in every direction. No angles, except the bands of sunlight stabbing through and being refracted.

“What a place . . .”

“It’s a PlanCom kind of place. Dust bowls, glaciers, deserts, moons—you name it, we’ll tame it.”

“But you’re right . . . it could be a paradise.”

“Ain’t I, though? You okay? Got legs?”

“I got rags with iron balls on the ends.”

“Welcome to space travel,” he said, and helped me to my feet.

“Hope I don’t have to run.”

Run . . . where? From here I saw about a dozen holes in the bottoms of the thicker glass columns, like cave mouths except that they opened up on other mouths. Then, up against the biggest of the columns were pathways shaped like half-tubes, like endless waterslides rolling senselessly as the eye could follow through the forest of glass.

“What carves a landscape like this?” I asked.

“Water,” Clark said. “Lots of it, about twelve million years ago. Pretty much gone now, except for some subterranean flows. They can only be accessed with sophisticated drilling and plumbing, and the flows have to be purified for human consumption. PlanCom’s subcontracting the job out to a cousin of mine.”

Bottling our nerves, we came down the *Vinza’s* ramp and the ramp dutifully closed behind us as soon as the last foot was off. They weren’t kidding about security.

I followed the two lead Marines and Clark in that order, and the stocky Polynesian magnetologist, Gaylord, then the bosun, Pocket, right in front of me like usual. Gaylord didn’t seem outwardly smart, but he had to be. He was responsible for all the zillion jobs done by magnets aboard the *Vinza*, including those pertaining to her complex propulsion system. In front of me bobbed Pocket’s ropy blond ponytail. Pocket was detail-oriented and in a constant state of reorganization, and give or take compulsive gambling, was bright and in charge of his universe. He was also in charge of the details of this evacuation. Didn’t seem like a bad job, all in all, being a bosun. If I’d had the brains, maybe I’d have liked his job. I like jobs that have beginnings, middles, and ends.

As we passed between two very large columns that were very close together, we had to squeeze to single file through a quite claustrophobic passage. When I came out, Sergeant Berooz stood escort for the first half of the line. He dipped his shoulder to make eye contact with the rearguard, a movement which caused me to bend sideways out of his way. My right foot skidded off balance and I started to slide down a dropoff. At the point of almost no return, Berooz caught my arm and put me back in place as if I were a doll

falling off a shelf. I laced my hand into his field vest and clung gratefully for a few seconds.

Only when I regained balance did I look down into the grade and discover that I couldn't see a bottom. "Go down and get my stomach."

"Don't want to lose you," he said. "Looks like some kind of a sinkhole."

"Thanks . . ."

"No problem. Payback for when you found my lucky bandanna." He tilted his weapon so I could see the yellow cowboy bandanna with white swirls, which he had snugly tied around his wrist. "That was great how you helped me to think my way back to it."

"It had to be somewhere," I said. "All we had to do was eliminate everywhere else in the universe."

"Neat trick. You answered my prayer."

"I thought that was God's job."

He grinned and fell in beside me as we moved after the others, more cautiously now.

Behind me came Axell and Mark, the computer specialist and one of the mechanics. Axell was a misplaced forty-year-old egghead with an overbite, who could dismantle half the ship and put it back together without losing a single microbolt, but had trouble using a fork at dinner. Mark was a tousled-haired kid who'd run away from home and joined the space fleet. He delighted in sending communiqués home to his parents and crowing about not having to live with them anymore. Despite a punky, immature attitude, he had a mechanical aptitude that earned him a place on this fairly exclusive ship. At first, I'd rolled my eyes at them, but after watching them work for a while, I quit doing that. Between them, the odd couple

knew more technical wizardry than most hundred other people put together.

After them came Bonnie with her medical pack, and two more Marines, Private Carmichael and Corporal Edney. Carmichael seemed out of place to me. He looked as if he'd just entered high school and was wearing the Marine uniform and sensor helmet for Halloween. Even next to Edney, a steroidal female bodybuilder, Carmichael seemed frail. Still, he was a Marine in this elite unit, so there had to be something about him that was qualified for combat.

Their sensor helmets were more caps than helmets, very scaled-down and easier to wear than a full-sized helmet. They weren't hard hats, but made of strong webbing, only slightly bulkier than baseball caps, with a sun-shading brim over the eyes, and embedded with nanotechnology for communication, warning, and surveillance. I had one myself back home; most cops did, but not as fancy as the ones these commandoes wore. In fact, these Marines' caps were new issue, colored in the red-black stripes of the landscape around here, as were their uniforms. As they walked ahead of us, weapons poised, they melted into the panorama of columns and caves.

The rest of the crew would stay inside the *Vinza*, guarded at all times by the other Marines, also bristling with weapons. I envied them. I'd hoped for some nice bright sunlight and maybe a fresh cool breeze, but here I was with indirect light, no breeze at all, dry heat, and the smell of stale bananas. Not a bit of green. Not a leaf, not a spore.

I looked up at the hanging white gauze at the fading green-banded moon.

"What's the moon got to do with it, Clark?" I asked.

A pace ahead of me, Clark scanned the interior of a suspicious tunnel. "With what?"



"You said something about a planet with a moon. How rare it is."

"Didn't know you were listening. Having a moon stabilizes the rotation of a planet. If there's no moon, a planet wobbles on its axis and the weather goes nutz. Tides, storms, polar changes . . . real wreck. Life would have a hell of a time surviving. We've tried to put colonies on some of those, but it makes for a miserable existence. All kinds of limitations on agriculture, livability, you name it. It's so hard to live that no progress can be made, so there's no point trying." He pointed up at the sky. "Gotta have that moon going for you. Gaylord, how close did we get to our mark?"

"The location of the original drop-off was forty meters north, just through those thicker spires," Gaylord said. "Good landing, considering."

"Nice job, Barry," Clark spoke into his wristcom. "You put us on the dot. Stand by."

*"Standing by, oh Great Red Leader."*

Clark held up a hand. Everybody except the Marine vanguard froze in place, including me, instinctively. "Freeze" I can do. The Marines in front fanned out, their enormous weapons first, clearing the way. Their boots made a *crush-crush* noise on the slippery footing of dead critters.

*"Sparren, Vinza. Any sign of them?"* Theo radioed.

"Not so much as a food canister," Clark reported. "We can see the huts, but there's no movement. Try them again on the big com."

*"I've been trying. No response continent-wide. Dead air."*

"No beacons? Locators? Auto-feeds?"

*"Just yours."*

As I moved up behind Clark, he knew I was there. "Why don't we just go up and knock?" I asked.

"We will, but I just want to do this slowly and carefully, is all."

"Why aren't they answering?"

"Maybe they moved," he said. "Over the mountains or someplace else."

I didn't fall for it. "They should still be able to hear us."

He raised his com unit and spoke into it again. "Attention, Malvaux Research Team. This is Captain Clark Sparren. Anybody picking this up?"

The com emitted a soft buzz, but no voices. There was a sense of a signal's going out, reaching down through these many slides, into the empty distance.

"They're dead," Gaylord murmured very quietly. "This is bad." Fear glowed from his dark eyes and gave a pasty grayness to his bronze island complexion.

He glanced at me, then purposefully averted his eyes.

Clark digested that comment. "Jury's still out."

I don't know whether he was speaking for my benefit or not. Gaylord had just proclaimed the likely death of the only relatives I had. I think it bothered him more than it bothered me.

Clark stepped away. I reached out, caught his sleeve, and pulled.

"Tell the truth," I demanded. "When was the last time anybody contacted this outpost? When's the last time anybody heard my mother's voice?"

He licked his lips. "Been a while."

"How long?"

"This isn't the time for this, Rory. We're here. They're not. We have to find them. We have to confirm their status and evac anybody who's not—"

My face heated up and so did my tone. "Is that why we're really here? To confirm they're dead?"

"Nobody said anything like that."

"It's the *not* saying, Clark."

"Would I have brought you here if I thought they were dead? I could've taken anybody with a badge to be the legal officer. I asked for you, remember?"

I had no good answer. During the pause, he pulled away and crunched down the path of skeletal mulch, and I followed. The Marines and crew fell into formation again around us. The Marines carried some kind of new weapon I hadn't seen before, compact personal firing units with carefully balanced power packs. These things weren't exactly guns in the conventional sense. I was hoping to see a demonstration eventually.

From here, at the top of a sloping path between the forest of red columns of all imaginable diameters, we could see the humpy bowl shaped huts which to all but human eyes—the designers hoped—blended fluidly into the environment. Actually, except for the shape, they did. They were the only round things in sight, which was all that set them apart. The color pattern, though, went against the bowl shape and actually mimicked the horizontal stripes of black and yellow on the natural columns. Somebody had done a pretty good job.

"I don't see anybody," Bonnie said, her voice very tentative.

"They're not answering hails," Pocket confirmed. "I been broadcasting right along."

Gaylord somehow made his large body smaller as we carefully moved down the slope. "Maybe their coms are down."

Pocket made an unforgiving huff. "They still should've heard the ship land. I'm for blowing this burgh. If we can't find them electronically, we can't find them."

"I'm for that," Mark echoed. "We should split. We can't be Superman for everybody." Mark always wanted to do the least work

he could get away with. He had a roadhouse singing voice and entertained the crew with his folk songs, but that was the only thing he was enthusiastic about. Everything else, he did exactly what he had to do and not a lick more. He was out here with us because Clark wanted to make him perform.

"We still have to account for them," Clark said. "Or satisfy Rory that they're no longer alive."

"This place is creepy," Bonnie said, voicing what we were all feeling.

"It's only the silence that's creepy," I suggested.

"Don't worry, ma'am," MacCormac said to her. "We're still well inside the ship's protection grid."

Despite his assurances, I sensed that nobody felt secure.

I wasn't that sure what we were facing. Clark and the Marines hadn't exactly been forthcoming about details, and I suspected that was because there wasn't much positive and they didn't want to be negative. Confidence was a tool. I, for one, believe in full disclosure.

"Sure is hot." Gaylord wiped the sweat out of his eyes.

Pocket kept his eyes fixed on his hand-held scanners. "Hundred four in the shade. I'll take bets on how cold it gets in the caves."

"No you won't," Clark warned.

We fell to silence again as we entered the camp of half-round huts, each big enough to house up to five people in fair comfort. For a moment we paused at the outskirts, just looking. The Marines scouted and Pocket scanned, but there was no sign of anything living. No movement, no readings.

The camp was in permanent shadows, overcast by the gauze hanging above. Four of the nine huts carried veils of fallen gauze, which was dissolving slowly as if melting over the shapes of the huts. To say there was no sign of life might be inaccurate . . . now I

could see the evidence of bad housekeeping, if nothing more. Scattered clothing items, long abandoned, evidence of a fire long gone cold, and a pile of food containers.

As we cautiously entered the closet thing to a common center to the camp, I spotted four—no, five large lumps of the fallen gauze from above lying on the ground. What attracted me was that they were all shaped like bread dough, in seemingly tidy loafs.

“Look at the doors,” Pocket pointed out. “They all look the same.”

Every hut’s sliding door was open about seven or eight inches, and obviously locked from the outside with clamps fixed to the scissor-arches.

“I don’t like that,” Clark said. “Big enough to look through, but not enough to enter or exit.”

“Stay back, everyone,” MacCormac ordered. “Berooz, recon that hut.”

Sergeant Berooz thumped forward, leaving fat, booty footprints in the skulch. I admired him for his forwardness. He didn’t peek inside, he didn’t hesitate. He strode up aggressively, shoved his weapon’s muzzle into the eight-inch opening, and clicked on the light beam to illuminate the inside. He watched the little screen that saved him from having to actually stick his face in there. As if it would fit.

“Sir, I got bodies,” Berooz reported. “No life signs. No heat signatures. All cold.”

“What kind of bodies?”

“Seem to be human, sir, by the skull shapes.”

“How many?” MacCormac asked.

“At least six.”

“Oh, God,” Bonnie murmured.

Clark glanced at me. “Let’s get it open.”

Berooz let his weapon pivot down on his harness, a smart device that let a soldier work with his hands without putting his weapon on the ground or handing it over to someone else. "Jaws," he requested.

Pocket pulled a portable hydraulic device from his backpack, took a shallow breath, and did his duty by stepping through to Berooz. Together they fitted the device, with its two pliers-like jaws into the unwelcoming opening in the door panel, turned the device on, and stepped back.

The jaws hummed for two seconds, then began to separate. The squawl of protesting metal soon had us wincing, but not for long. Five seconds, and the locks cracked. The doors were free. Berooz moved in and slammed the panels aside.

The Marines went in first, Berooz and Edney together. It didn't take long.

When they came back out, Berooz fought to control his expression and simply said. "It's clear. Four bodies, all human, all dead, sir."

Clark looked a little sick, but he said, "I'll have a look."

I pushed between the others and caught his arm. "I'll do it."

"But they could be," he began, "your . . ."

"I'm a homicide detective. I've seen bodies before."

"Yeah, but they . . ." He stopped trying. "I'm real sorry about this. I didn't think it'd be this way."

"Didn't you?" Steele with my own sense of reality, I forced myself to act as if I had no hesitation.

Tears of empathy ran down Bonnie's face as I passed her. Her face carried all the pain I was burying.

Or should've been.

I should've been feeling something, shouldn't I?

Much easier to keep moving. I didn't even pause at the door, but stepped all the way inside the hut. Berooz held his weapon so that

the light source bounced off the far wall and cast a band of light on the contents of the pre-fab house. No, not a house . . . in its last use by humans, the hut had been something else.

My skin shrank as I entered the dim circular space. There was a stench, but in this dry heat the smell of decomposition was naturally diminished. Still, I recognized the odor of dead human flesh. There was no other scent like it. This hut would never be livable again.

Along the rim of the inner wall lay two human corpses directly in front of me, shrouded in a milky spun-cotton material. I steeled myself and started toward them. Something bumped my forehead. I jolted back and looked up, my hands pressed back against the wall of the hut.

I'd been bumped by a naked human foot. In the middle of the hut, suspended from a construction ring, hung a dead woman dangling by the neck. She had no clothing except panties and bra. Her face was mummified, like the rest of her, yet there was still a clear expression of desperate sadness in the set of the jaw, even though the jaw was twisted askew by the rope.

No, it wasn't a rope . . . it was the braided shreds of her clothing.

I reach up and stopped her from swinging. She'd swung en-ough for one millennium. "Sorry," I whispered.

The nearest body on the ground was wrapped loosely in that odd grayish shroud, like the forms outside. I knelt beside it and scooped the gray stuff away. It pulled like cotton candy, with only a pause for resistance, and it was slightly sticky and clung to my hand. It pulled against the partly decomposed body of a mutilated man. His skull and chest were large, bones bulky and obviously masculine. And there was a hole in the chest the size of a bowling ball.

My heart started to thump. The sternum was completely gone, along with about half his ribcage. On second look, some of the ribs

were still here, but broken outward and hanging on only by filaments. I knew an explosion when I saw one. Something was in, and it came out on its own terms.

A tiny movement in my periphery made me blink and look at my own arm. The white-gray stuff was crawling up my sleeve.

“What—!” Instinctively I drew back. The gauze fibers snapped and recoiled. Embedded in the fibers were dark stringy items that I had mistaken for more fibers. They weren’t. They were long ropy weevils with definite heads and tails if I looked closely. That was what made the gray haze in what was otherwise white fibrous material. They moved very slowly, but they moved.

I paused to think. After a few seconds, I went ahead and kept picking at the cotton, cord-weevils and all.

“Rory?” Clark called. “You okay in there?”

“Come on in, but be prepared.”

Once he got past his initial reaction, I said, “They’re all the same. Chests exploded. Except this woman up hanging here. I think she hanged herself to avoid what happened to the others.”

“What are they doing in here?” he asked. “It’s the same out there. Two other huts have bodies. They couldn’t get out, and nobody else could get in. Is it possible they locked themselves in?”

This was too weird. Had they locked themselves in or locked something else out? The locks were attached from the outside—were they bait? Was this punishment? Prison? Had the scientists gone crazy and had some kind of feud?

“How many bodies are in the other huts?”

“Four in one and three in the other.”

I gazed up at him. “You know what happened to them, don’t you?”

“Yeah.”



"But there are also five outside the huts, wrapped in that gauzy stuff."

"It's not gauze. It's this planet's idea of maggots."

"Jesus . . ."

I moved to the next two bodies in the hut. They huddled together like the victims of Pompeii, braced against the side of the hut, one in the arms of the other, shrouded with thick gauze and only a few thin black weevils. Both had their chests bombed out. The one had held the other until his own time came. They had accepted their fates, unlike the woman hanging above. These were both men. Their faces still had flesh enough to see their features. They were broad-browed and handsome, with strands of straight raven-black hair. They each wore bright orange T-shirts that looked to me like sports team shirts. The torn fronts had white letters, but there was no way to read them now. Brothers? Was I witness here to a family tragedy?

"Wait a minute—" I stood up and looked at the woman who had hanged herself. "How'd she get up there?"

Clark looked around. "Nothing to climb on . . ."

I turned the woman's body like a bell. Her shrunken arms hung stiff, but her chest was unbroken and there were no weevils on her. They probably couldn't reach her up there. Her body had simply dried up.

"Do you think Bonnie could tell me how long this woman's been hanging here?"

"Probably. She must've worked on cadavers before. Bonnie! Brace yourself and come here."

There was a crunch of footsteps. Bonnie came in and made a terrible gasp at the sight. She clapped both hands to her mouth. "Oh—God—God—what—what happened to them! What—happened—to—them!"

“Shh!” Clark grabbed her by both arms. “Steady up! You know what happened.”

“Oh—God—why—why are they in here like this? Who put them in here?”

Clark drew her to the middle of the hut. “Can you tell us how long this woman’s been dead?”

I held the hanging woman still while Bonnie fought to compose herself, tears running down her face now. “It’s okay,” I reassured. “Her troubles are over. Let’s get her down.”

Grisly work, for sure. We cut the woman down, and had to be careful in handling her—she was ready to fall apart. This wasn’t Clark’s kind of work. He seemed very uneasy at the disrespect we had to show this woman as we lowered her stiffened corpse to the floor of the hut.

“Okay, Bonnie,” I began. “I’m sorry to tell you this, but I need you to cut her open.”

“Cut her open? Oh . . . you mean . . .” She made a motion on her own chest.

I nodded. “I need to know what’s in there.”

She grimaced in misery and opened her pack to expose a small surgical set.

While she worked, I crunched to the fourth body, this one very much alone, both arms and both legs twisted backward in the agony of a final throe. This one was a man, judging by its size and big hands, and seemed to be the most decayed. I pulled back the white gauze, which confirmed my guess by being completely free of black weevils. They had obviously finished with this one long ago and they were gone. Maybe they moved to other bodies, or maybe they went on their lives’ way.

Bonnie's sniffs tapered off as she involved herself in her work. I tried to hover back from the work area, trying not to make her self-conscious as she did the ugly work I had asked of her.

Then, a silver flicker winked in Berooz's muzzle light, a flicker on the hanged woman's hand. It almost called to me. Moving slowly, not to disturb Bonnie, I turned the dead woman's bony hand over. The flicker was a brushed-satin platinum ring, very expensive, with a large marquis diamond and swirly black etchings around the band . . . a wedding ring. The bride's ring.

The hand fell apart, leaving the ring in my palm.

"Thanks," I responded quietly. "I'll take care of it." I put the ring in my breast pocket before anyone else could see.

As if she understood, the woman's contorted arm went slack and sank to the hut floor. So she was finally resting.

Tears still ran from Bonnie's eyes, but she was sternly doing her work. "About a year," she said.

I peeked at what she was doing. "What about . . ."

"It's there," she said, and pointed inside the woman's now-open chest cavity, at a shriveled and dried mass shaped like a carrot. "She killed herself before it matured."

"Jeez . . ." Clark murmured.

Bonnie looked up at him. "There's something else . . . she was pregnant."

The depths of sorrow that must have been played out in this hut now communicated themselves to us as if they were fresh and immediate.

Bonnie started to cry, unable to hold it in anymore. "She didn't want to give birth to that thing before giving birth to her own child. Two things growing inside her . . . so sad . . ."

Somewhat coldly, I said, "Even sadder that she was here in the first place."

"How'd she get up there?" Clark asked again.

I looked at the ceiling.

"There's only one way," I said. "Somebody in here helped her."

\* \* \*

Driven by sheer nerves, we took only nineteen minutes to catalogue the other bodies. The crew and Marines let me investigate first, before their boots and reactions disturbed any evidence. Bonnie followed me around, taking DNA samples for later, that is, after she got over her introduction to the black maggoty things. I looked for other details. A man with a pocket full of pictures of antique cars. Another man with military dog tags and cloisonné teeth—a fad from about twelve years ago. A woman with a diabetic maintenance armband. She wore a flight suit with a name tag: Sgt. Lorna Claver. All but two of them had something in common—they wore wristbands or anklets of white and red macramé cord, with black beads. Somebody had a hobby.

In fact, the two who didn't have these macramé bands were the two who had been dead the longest.

Every detail spoke to me. They were my best friends. All these dead people were my best friends. Live people . . . they come and go.

Finally, the last body, this one outside of the hut, lying in a cocoon. I pulled away at the wormy gauze to bear the mummy inside. Their stories would be much different in a moist environment.

"This is the most recent one," I said as Bonnie knelt beside me.

"How recent, do you think?"

“Not very . . . probably months, not weeks. It’s a man. He walked with a limp from a leg injury. He also ate a lot of canned sliced carrots.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because he threw up right over there.”

“Oh . . . yes, he did, didn’t he?” Bonnie’s shoulders involuntarily hunched. “I admire that you can do this . . . put your hands into dead things and not be flustered.”

“I’m a homicide detective. I have to be callous or I couldn’t even sleep. I’d always be lying there thinking, ‘Gee, I could be out there helping somebody.’ There’s always somebody to help. You run out of strength, you run out of pity . . . you never run out of helpless people.”

Bonnie looked at me and studied my face until I wished she would turn away. I didn’t like the spotlight.

“I really do admire you,” she said. “You must be a lot like your mother. Strong, alert . . . perceptive, always seeing details other people miss.”

“It’s the training,” I said sharply.

She retreated a little, and went back to looking at the decayed body in its cotton bedroll. “This was always my worst thing in medical school, and we always had clean, controlled environments. I guess maybe I went into the wrong field.”

“Just because death bothers you? I like doctors who are bothered by death. Me, I look at dead guys all the time. If it’s dead, it can’t hurt you.”

She looked up at the tops of the cathedral of pillars. “This must be the pupal stage of these . . . ”

“Weevils,” I supplied, so she didn’t have to say maggots.

“Or maybe the adult stage,” she went on, avoiding the word altogether. “The gauze in the sky must have some kind of microbes or eggs in it, waiting for their time. It’s pure white up there, but down here it turns grayish because the parasites grow, and they’re black. They must reproduce up there, on the tops of the columns. When the gauze falls, it turns into a natural protective cocoon and the young feed on whatever it falls on.”

“If it falls on something dead.”

“Or alive and they kill it.”

“We know they feed on dead things,” I said. “Things that feed on dead flesh don’t eat live tissue.”

“On *our* planet,” she pointed out. “You’re good at analyzing. Did your mom teach you?”

“I might’ve picked up a thing or two around the mansion.”

She squeezed her shoulders with a rush of excitement. “It must’ve been just so stimulating to grow up with Jocasta Malvaux as your guiding force. She’s so brilliant— she’s made so many discoveries, and she’s articulate enough to explain them to the public in all those books and articles and vids . . . I just love her way of describing strange wonders. It’s true poetry.”

“Uh-huh. Glad you enjoy it.”

“Why didn’t you become a researcher like your mom and your sister?”

“I wasn’t born with the silver spoon of science in my mouth.”

Behind us, the Marines kept changing position, checking out the location and keeping their eyes on the outskirts of the camp. I took a message from their posture. I’d seen SWAT teams and rangers, Special Forces and colonial security teams, but there was something different today. These Marines were twitchy and scared. I’d seen Clark’s info-video of the animals we were avoiding, the things they

did to humans and other animals, implanting the bodies of others with their young, then the young burst out . . . in damned little time, I noted. In just a few hours, the implanted seed managed to gain weight and develop into a head and tail with teeth, possessing the power of a shotgun. With that power, it would break out. In those huts, we had the result. Dead humans with bombed-out chest cavities.

And of course I'd seen the shadowy security recordings of the adult animals. The pictures weren't good—legs, arms, claws, whip-like tails, and flashes of a head shaped like a zucchini. There was a record—or was it just a theory—that humans did better against them if we weren't surprised by them, and if we faced them down properly, with the proper weapons. They could be killed, we knew that.

Beside me, Bonnie was beginning to shiver. The air was hot, so she was shaking with fear, not cold.

To distract her, I asked, "What about you? What are you doing out here among all these hard-boiled assholes? Shouldn't you be working in a quiet little petting zoo? Petting something?"

She smiled, softening her otherwise boyish features. "My education was privately funded by PlanCom. They put me through medical school. When I'm done in January, I'm indentured to the company fifteen years. It's working out great for me. At the end of it, I'll be a fully fledged family physician and I'll be able to open a private practice and already have the whole company as my patients."

"Save a bat, save the planet, huh?"

"Why not? Your mother would agree. Butterball's a beautiful little showpiece for the success of intervention."

"From what I saw on the ship, Butterball can take care of herself," I said. "I hate things that fly."

"Oh, you don't mean that."

"Yeah? Fly at me some time."

"You'll put your hand in decaying flesh, but you don't like birds and butterflies?"

"I don't like flying shit that bites. You can't keep your eye on 'em."

She sniffed and wiped her nose with the back of her hand, because her fingers and palm were caked with the remains of those who should never have been here in the first place. I'd insulted her in some way, I could tell.

Looking pale and unhappy, Clark came up to us and broke our need for further talk. "Well? Any conclusions before we stop pretending it's going the way we expected?"

I spared Bonnie the burden of going first. "All the bodies in the huts had their chests burst, except for the one woman. The bodies outside were killed by other means. One had some kind of segmented garrote around his neck. He was strangled. Two were speared through the body."

"By what?"

"I don't know yet. No sign of weapons. I don't know if the researchers went crazy and killed each other, or those aliens you're avoiding speared them."

"What about the other three?"

I glanced at the rest of the team over there, the twitchy Marines and the spooked ship's crewmen who were waiting unhappily in the dim midst of this death ring. I lowered my voice.

"They were pretty much ripped apart. One of them's in three pieces."

"How long ago?" Clark asked, burying a shudder.



“Different times,” Bonnie spoke up. “In this arid environment, protected by the cocoons, the black parasites may have the luxury of taking their time. I’ll have to let the medical computer analyze the tissue before we’ll know for sure.”

“I don’t think we need to know,” Clark said. “This doesn’t look good for sticking around. They didn’t last very long, did they? Rory, I hope you agree with me when I say that.”

I shrugged. “There’s a lot of violence here.”

He leaned closer. “Are any of them . . . uh . . . ”

“My mother or my sister? No. I’ve got three women here. One wore a wedding ring. One had dark red hair, and the third is too tall.”

“I’m sorry to drag you into this.”

“Quit apologizing. It’s just business.”

“Okay. You’re lying, but okay.”

“Captain! Over here!”

The call came from MacCormac. We knotted up into a group—mostly because nobody wanted to be alone—and Clark led the way down the hill and just out of the camp, into a grotto of red glass and dark black crispy mulch. On a quick look, I figured the sudden change from sand-colored skeletal mulch to this black stuff meant a lot of those black parasites tended to die in this area. At least, that was the uneducated conclusion. Actually, the black crunch could’ve come from any other source. What did I know about it?

“Stop!” Pocket called.

We piled into each other as we skid to a stop.

“We’re about to leave the ship’s protection grid.” He showed us the screen on his palm-tech. “Not the brightest idea, right?”

“Should we do that?” Bonnie asked.

Clark looked bewildered and didn't have an answer. He had-n't expected to leave the grid at all, never mind so soon.

At the bottom of the slope, MacCormac appeared. "Come on down! It's safe! Be careful of the slope. It's slippery as hell."

The slope was indeed slippery, made of what must be millions of years of collected mini-skeletons crushed to a fine consistency and creating a dune-like slide. We helped each other down, but Carmichael stayed at the top when MacCormac signaled him to do so. I got the idea from the way he looked down here that he was perfectly happy staying up there. I only went halfway down myself, and was content to stay just far down enough to see what was going on.

At the bottom was a dimly lit grotto of mulch and glass that was like walking into the neck of a bottle and coming out inside. In front of us, Colonel MacCormac, Sergeant Berooz, and Corporal Edney stood around a nest of oval pods the size of beachballs. There were more than a dozen, each with its meaty top popped like a zit, triangular petals folded back and dried up. The Marines had their weapons pointed at the empty pods, and they were visibly nervous.

"Oh, crap!" Clark blurted.

He threw his arms out at his sides and stopped us all in our tracks. Bonnie and I bunched up behind him. "Oh, crap, crap," he boiled over.

"It's safe," MacCormac assured. "They're all expended. All hatched. They must've been the ones that . . . got a grip on those people in the huts. Y'know what I mean . . ."

"What are they doing here?" Bonnie asked, breathing in little gulps. "Aren't they supposed to be in some secluded incubation chamber? Isn't that what the reports say? This isn't like *any* of the reports. Why are they out here by themselves?"

Her confusion came out in fear. Information she had depended on was already falling apart, and we weren't an hour into the mission.

"It looks like there must've been an attack," Clark guessed. "Several of the researchers got pinched by the hatched stage of those creatures. The fingery, ugly, y'know . . . those. The researchers might have all died defending themselves."

Oh, boy, here it came. Did I have to tell them?

Yes.

"They wouldn't have defended themselves," I said.

Clark gawked at me for shooting down his theory.

"They wouldn't have had weapons," I confirmed when I saw his expression.

"Excuse me?" Colonel MacCormac stepped closer, his square face screwed up in military complaint.

"No weapons. My mother wouldn't allow it. You don't come into the wolf's territory, then shoot the wolf when it attacks you. You don't swim with sharks, then get mad when one bites you. If you're stupid enough to get killed, too bad."

"No defense?" MacCormac contributed.

Edney hissed, "Now, *that's* stupid."

I congratulated her with a glower. "Welcome to how Jocasta Malvaux thinks. She may not have allowed them to harm these—these 'animals.'"

"Why in the devil not?" MacCormac asked. He wasn't being rhetorical. He wanted clarification.

"Because my mother has a little religious colony going here," I supplied, "complete with martyrs. I've seen it before."

At the crest of the slope, Private Carmichael, his voice much more timid than his weapon-bristling appearance, asked, "Every living thing fights for its life, right?"

I snapped him a harsh look. "Not brainwashed sacrificial lambs young enough to think that after you die, you wake back up and then you're famous. Anybody who came on this trip because you wanted my mother's autograph should've gotten it a year ago in some nice bookstore. If she got herself killed, that's fine. I'm just sorry she took my sister and all those innocent starry-eyed chumps with her."

In the stultified second after my words obviously stunned everybody into a whole new scare, I felt bad that I'd had to tell them the unvarnished truth.

Not enough to coddle them, though. "Besides," I added, "notice that there aren't any dead aliens lying around. The researchers didn't fight."

There was no way to ignore the fact that something else happened than we had first assumed. Nobody reviled my declarations more than I did. Nobody wanted to turn around and get out of here more. I'd believed Clark's descriptions of an easy mission, quick on, quick off, drinks all around. I'd actually believed my mother might be the only problem and that we could handle her. I'd made the mistake of concentrating on that and letting somebody else worry about other things.

"Screw this shit to the wall." Colonel MacCormac shook his head in frustration and clumsy attempts to sound in control. "I gotta take a piss."

He crunched around to the other side of the nearest pillar, while the rest of us waited and had nothing to do but avoid meeting each other's eyes. True to Marine practice, Corporal Edney marched to the best place to keep an eye on us and also on MacCormac. Nobody was to be left alone, not even for an instant. Line of sight was to be scrupulously respected.

*"Sparren, Vinza."* Theo's voice came fairly clear over the speaker, so crisply that it was startling.

Clark cleared his throat to find his voice. "Yeah, Sparren here. What's up, Theo?"

*"I don't know. Something's going on outside. The guards are gone."*

Everyone turned to Clark, holding breaths. He brought the com up to his lips and turned away from us, trying to have a private conversation.

"Gone? Like—"

*"Like gone. I can't see 'em, I can't raise 'em. You want me to go out there and look around?"*

"Negative. Stay inside the ship. Nobody goes out. They're probably just looking around the perimeter."

*"Why aren't they answering? It's not like they can walk out of range."*

Clark crunched around and gave up trying to hide what was going on back at the ship. "MacCormac!"

"Yes, sir?" MacCormac appeared from the other side of the pillar, putting his pants back together after nature's call.

"Donahue and Brand aren't at their post at the ramp. They're not answering hails."

MacCormac's face flushed. His brows came down as he hit his own com unit. "Donahue, Brand, signal in immediately. This is MacCormac. Speak up!"

"What happened to them?" I asked.

"Nothing *can* happen to them," he assured. "They're in the ship's protection sphere and they're well-armed."

"Would they have left the protection sphere?"

"No. Not without orders."

"Because this is such a controlled environment?"

"Mind your own business, detective, will ya?"

I ignored him and demanded, "Has any of this protection equipment ever actually been tested on an alien planet?"

Clark's expression as he glanced at MacCormac, and the Marine's as he glanced back, gave me my answer. "Let's get back."

That was all Pocket, Axell, and Mark needed. The three of them scrambled back up the grade so fast that they lay a spray of black skulch on the rest of us.

Clark shouted, "Stay together! Hold your horses! Hey!"

As his three crewmen passed Carmichael at the top of the slope, Clark leaned forward to scratch his way up the grade, grasping Bonnie by the arm as he went and drawing her with him. "Come on! Come on, let's stay together! Rory, come on!"

"Let's move!" MacCormac snapped to his Marines.

Moving on the slope was like climbing around inside a bowl of cereal. Every step pushed more skulch downward. For every step, we slid two.

That was when Berooz slipped. His left foot went straight out sideways and he went down on his right knee. His weapon slammed into a pillar, splattering bits of hard material. The bits flew into my eyes, causing me to stumble for a crucial instant. Berooz twisted to recover, but the slippery grade shifted under him and he went over backward, his weapon flailing above his head. I made a wild reach for him, caught the tie on the bandanna on his wrist, and received a yank that almost pulled my shoulder out of joint. I couldn't hold him. The bandanna slipped out of my grip. Berooz pitched backward and head first, his back arched and his knees bent.

For just an instant I thought he'd be all right because all he had to fall on was expended egg pods and the skulchy mulch on the grotto floor. He landed on his back with his head bumping down inside an egg pod, which collapsed under his weight with a disgusting *splush*.

We all scratched to a stop and stared down. Berooz looked shocked, but blinked and lay there for a moment as if gathering himself to get up. In that pause, Edney uttered an aggravated, “Shit, jackass . . .”

Berooz grinned, embarrassed. Edney reached out to pull him up. As soon as his hand clasped hers, everything changed. Berooz’s expression changed to blinks of bewilderment, then he began to twitch—his whole body from the spine, as if he were being given electrical shocks.

“Get him out of there!” Clark shouted.

Before anyone could move, Berooz began belching horrible broken yowps of agony and surprise. The back of his sensor cap was smoking, billowing with green stenchy tendrils, and suddenly liquid began to splash from behind his ears and neck. The screams became high-pitched with panic.

Edney recoiled for crucial seconds, then found her courage and met MacCormac at their comrade’s sides. They pulled Berooz to his feet. He was stiff as stone, his eyes wild, hands splayed and wagging aimlessly. Edney yanked off Berooz’s sensor cap, and that in itself was a mistake. She stared at her own hand as it began to sizzle. Her glove dissolved in an instant, and her skin was next. She shrieked and fell backward into Clark.

“Acid!” I gasped.

I clawed for the blue cylinder on my belt and skidded toward Edney. I fell to my knees twice, which caused me to hold back after what I’d just seen happen to Berooz. Damning myself for hesitating, I tried to get to her. Heaving out short breaths, she stared at her hand as it fried like an egg.

MacCormac grabbed for his own and tried to spray it on the back of Berooz’s head, but he fumbled and lost precious seconds. Berooz

made one long howl of agony that seemed endless, stretching out until the last breath left his lungs. He dropped to a sitting position on the skulch, with MacCormac holding one arm, the other dropping flat at his side, palm up. The screaming stopped and changed to a prolonged wheeze.

MacCormac held him with one hand and sprayed the neutralizer base with the other, coating the back of Berooz's head until the canister hissed dry, empty. The wheezing of Berooz and the gasping of Edney. I pushed Edney up against a pillar and grasped her by the wrist, pushing her hand flat against the red glass. She gritted her teeth, lips peeling back, and hissed out her pain as I sprayed her hand with the base. The bubbling flesh began to settle down in a final thread of steam.

Only then did I turn to look at the nightmare playing out beside us.

Berooz's head was haloed in stinking smoke. His legs were twisted unnaturally under him. He pitched over sideways away from MacCormac, to land once again on his back, eyes glazed. What a stink . . .

MacCormac clung to him with both hands. "Help me get him up!" he shouted.

Clark and I were the closest. I pushed Edney, still in terrible pain, toward Bonnie. At the top of the slope, Pocket, Axell, and Mark had come back to look down at us, their faces pasted with confusion. Private Carmichael was on his way down the slope to help Bonnie with Edney.

To this audience the next horror played out. As Clark and I helped MacCormac take Berooz's arms and lift him again to a sitting position, the poor young man went instantly from alive to dead. When we picked him up, the back of his head stayed on the ground.



His brain tumbled out, rolled down his back, and slumped into the puddle of white neutralizer.

And there it lay.

\* \* \*

Clark stumbled backward, petrified. MacCormac stared at the empty braincase of his comrade, and down at the disembodied brain lying in a vomitous gout of bubbles.

Me, I just crouched there holding the dead man's other arm, once again gripping his bandanna-wrapped wrist. Berooz's body stiffened in place. He never did go limp. I'd heard of that. Corpses on battlefields, still holding their guns up, still aiming.

Above me, I heard Edney's pained gasps and Bonnie's sobs as she tried to hold it in, but couldn't.

I had to force myself not to pick up the brain and stuff it back into Berooz's head to wake him up. Only minutes ago he'd saved my life from the same kind of misstep. I hadn't caught him.

I hadn't caught him . . .

What good was I here? What good could I possibly do here? I couldn't save the life of a man standing next to me. What was I doing here?

What if that had been Clark?

Instantly I felt terrible for comparing a man I knew well to one I'd just met. Berooz was a simple guy, easy to make happy. And apparently just as easy to make dead.

"Bring him," MacCormac rasped. He threw Berooz's weapon over his shoulder, beside his own weapon. "Help me bring him . . . help me carry him . . ."

"It'd be better to leave him—" I began.

"We're taking him! I'm not leaving him here!"

MacCormac was either falling apart, or exhibiting exactly what we all needed. Since I didn't have the people sense to know which was which, I just clammed up and helped him carry Berooz to the middle of the grade, where Pocket and Mark solemnly met us and took his legs. We struggled to the top of the grainy slope.

As we reached the top, Clark appeared beside us, carrying Berooz's brain in the Marine's discarded and half-dissolved cap.

Clark's features were sallow and drawn as he met my eyes. "A man deserves to be buried whole."

I looked at Berooz's face as we held him suspended between us. The back of his head still dripped. His eyes peered up at me imploringly.

MacCormac's face worked and twitched with emotion as if he had a mouthful of glue. He was enraged and mourning, fighting for acceptance, for control, so he could continue to lead. I knew that look. It was the cold bottle of a cop's life, trying to get the job done without breaking down, to find answers without giving up the inner information that would chisel away our objectivity.

Clark started walking off his torment, leading in his own way. Carmichael moved to one side, Axell to the other, and Clark passed through them, heading back the way we had come, to walk through that sad camp to our ship, and then to leave this planet. It was all in their posture. We'd come too late, and botched the simple plan.

I would go with them, all the time wishing I'd never come to this pesthole. I was done too.

MacCormac, Pocket, and Mark and I carried Berooz. Carmichael bravely led the vanguard, though his steps were mechanical and halting. Axell waited until we passed, then helped Bonnie with the wounded Corporal Edney.

We were halfway between the grotto and the camp when Pocket's scanner started flashing red on its screen and beeping in broad tones. We all stopped while Pocket held Berooz's foot with one hand and picked up the scanner on its shoulder strap with the other. He looked at the screen, then looked up at the tightly packed columns and unwelcoming channels in the landscape behind us.

"Uh . . . guys . . . " he murmured. At once he dropped Berooz's leg, clasped the scanner in both hands, and stared up at the long trenchlike gulley extending onward past the grotto's mouth and around a bend. "Something's coming! A lot of somethings!"

"People?" Clark asked.

"Not unless they've shrunk to the size of squids!"

"How many?"

"Sixty . . . seventy . . . seventy-five . . . Mother Mary!"

"Drop him!" I shouted to MacCormac and Axell.

"No!" MacCormac kicked at me as I let go of Berooz's arm and his body crunched to the ground. "You pick him back up! Pick him up!"

The argument was already history. At the end of the visible corridor appeared a single creature. It looked like a scorpion with extra-long legs—or a human hand gone mutant. No eyes, no head, yet it was taking a bead on us from fifty yards away. Behind it whipped a long segmented tail, waving in the air, snapping back, forth, back, forth in a manner of threat.

MacCormac dropped Berooz and grabbed for his weapon, somehow managing to disentangle it from Berooz's, which was also strapped to him. He cleared the muzzle, aimed, and fired without pausing.

The spidery ghoul exploded into uncountable pieces. Bits of it bounced off two pillars on the sides of the corridor, and I swore it squealed as it died.

“Not enough!” Pocket warned. “Nowhere near enough! There they are!”

As we stood stupefied in that one instant that everybody hates, when you can’t move and you know you should, suddenly dozens of the craven creatures showed themselves at the gulley’s bend.

They came around the pillars—on the pillars, crawling around the glass pillar the way squirrels do around trees, and they jumped from column to column, crossing wide spaces in instants, closer and closer by the leap. They crowded along the gulley floor, their finery appendages clicking staccato on the skulch. Behind them came a second wave, fundamental as scorpions, tails high and snapping, racing toward us on their spindles.

“Face-huggers!” Clark shouted. “Think with your legs!”

# 4

Berooz's mutilated body struck the path floor. His empty skull made a *pok* on the skulch. In an instant everyone was running. I drew my plasma pistol and fired on the run. A bolt of compact plasma streaked back and splattered two scorpions, but the others closed in and skittered over the exploded remains without the slightest disruption.

"Run, run!" Pocket called out with each of his own pounding paces. "Run, run, run, run, run!"

Impossible. A glance over my shoulder told me we might as well have been trying to run under water. The hyperkinetic face-hugger platoon covered the yards between us like brushfire.

"Marines!" MacCormac saw the same thing. He skidded around to face the hair-raising sight.

Despite every instinct of self-preservation instilled in Humanity since the dawn of time, he and Carmichael scraped to stops on either side of me. Even Edney, wounded as she was, shook off the support from Bonnie and Clark and ordered, "Keep going!"

Clark pushed Bonnie, Axell, and Mark in front of him. "Faster!"

"Formation!" MacCormac bellowed.

Corporal Edney cranked around, using her acid-burned right hand to support her weapon, and brought it to her shoulder to be fired by her left hand. I saw the pain reaming her face and admired her tremendously.

The three Marines came to meet each other and adjusted their stance to put all of us behind them and themselves in a perfect line, ten feet abreast of each other. I didn't understand why until an instant later, when the chittering fingers of the face-huggers became maddeningly close, rushing along the ground and jumping from pillar to pillar, covering ground shockingly fast. The whipping assault was almost upon us. I couldn't shoot over my shoulder, or I'd hit one of the Marines, so I stopped and braced to take aim. I never got the chance to fire.

"Ready!" MacCormac shouted. With the courage of training and of spirit, the Marines set their weapons on their targets and somehow waited for their commander's order.

"Volley!" MacCormac called.

The Marines engaged their enormous guns.

*FOOOOM—crack!*

Three arched waves of electrical energy in a blinding neon-orange blew from the Marines' weapons and shocked the flank of face-huggers. The wave actually rolled back a few feet. They were frying in place!

"Volley!" MacCormac shouted again.

*FOOOOM—crack!*

"Volley! Double!"

*FOOOOM—crack crack!*

With each volley the blinding orange energy wave drove the face-huggers back another fifty feet, buying us time to run. We made it back to the middle of the camp, jumping over the swaddled corpses

and zagging between the huts toward the ship. The chittering sound faded back, then began to surge behind us again. After the third volley, the Marines broke formation and ran with us until they too were at the camp, where they again stopped and formed up, facing the nightmare. MacCormac's voice was the steadying force in the chaos.

"Flames! Fire at will!"

They uniformly clacked their weapons to another setting and opened up with streams of gas-fed flame, broiling the rolling ranks of creatures including the ones that were jumping from pillar to pillar. The creatures fell on each other, shrieking and raving, and began to tangle up and lose ground.

"Cease fire! Retreat and recharge!"

I stuffed my plaz back into my vest pocket and skidded against a pillar. "MacCormac!" I called. "Weapon!"

As the Marines caught up, the colonel instinctively tossed me Berooz's heavy weapon. It rolled once in the air and with a long reach I caught it. The weight, despite excellent balance, almost took me down. Like theirs, it was a military-issue combination explosive-tipped percussion rifle, flamethrower, and electrical field dispersal cannon and a dozen other exclusive features for sensing and accuracy. I hoped on the soul of my favorite person on Earth, if I had one, that I could figure it out in time.

The others were ahead of us now, gaining at least some ground. We turned again to stand our ground, this time with me and Berooz's weapon added to the rank.

"Volley!" MacCormac's command energized us all.

I pulled the trigger. Out came a shuddering bolt of flame instead of the energy wave, while the others all managed to actually work the weapon properly and get the shocker component. I stopped,

lowered the weapon into a thin band of sunlight, and found the control pad so I could reset it for the shock wave.

“Volley!”

This time I got it right. *FOOOOM—crack!*

The mad alien squall blew into a wide roll of acid and flesh.

“Volley!”

Again we fired, each time driving the creatures back, but they weren’t stopping. Unaffected by fear or thought, they simply replenished their dead with more from behind, but we were managing to slow them down and gain ground. Every volley force decimated the front line of the aliens and tangled those behind it as they stumbled into each other’s fingers and tails. Their physical momentum caused them to knot up with each other’s bodies and their long bones to snap in such numbers that we could actually hear the crackle.

“Retreat!” MacCormac ordered at the right instant, just when I would’ve done the same thing, just as the alien scorpions rolled backward, stumbling into knots, fouling their advance.

The four of us scratched into a full run. We could see the ship—the ramp—Theo at the top of the ramp waving us in. My legs burned with the effort of running on the unforgiving skulch that brushed away under every step.

Somebody hit me . . . something tripped me . . . what happened—I was on the ground. What happened? Something rammed into my chest, drove me down, left me gasping, aching—

The Marine weapon was still in my arms. I clung to it and tried to get to my knees. Why was I down? What had hit me? I couldn’t think . . . had MacCormac kicked me in the stomach?

“Keep moving! Get up!”



It was Axell. Geeky and clumsy as he was, he'd come back for me. He knotted his fists into my vests and twisted me to my feet. I looked back just as I gained footing. The alien wave of lariat tails and spindle fingers were coiled in bundles on the ground between the camp and the ship. They squealed and tumbled, trying to find their feet. Some staggered, then stumbled. Their bodies spat tendrils of smoke and tissue.

Ahead of me, Pocket and Mark were staggering to their own feet. Had they tripped?

Then it happened again—the big gut-punch. This time I saw the flash of green energy. The ship's protection system! At least now I knew what was knocking us down and I could fight it. This time I stumbled back into a pillar the diameter of my wrist and it shattered with the impact. Fragments of glass, broken into pieces the size of pop cans, collapsed onto my head and shoulders and on Axell as he ducked beside me.

"This is so unfair!" he complained.

Colonel MacCormac reached us and pushed Axell out of the raining shards. "Carmichael, volley!"

The two of them formed up and fired another volley. They were running on sheer training and determination. I knew they'd been punched hard just the same as I, and everybody. Between me and the ship, Pocket and Bonnie were dragging themselves and Edney up the ramp.

I planted my feet under me in the detritus of the fallen pillar and tried to take aim, but never got the chance. Two face-huggers blew past me, racing toward the ramp. Maybe they didn't sense me there in my cloud of rubble—I don't know—but one of them launched itself into the air and slammed into Axell's face.

I saw his face, his eyes and gaping mouth at the last instant. He saw the thing shoot itself directly at him, saw it close on his face, the reaching fingers and whipping tail crowding out the landscape. He made a gushing noise of insult just before it hit him.

Spinning, I aimed my weapon at it, but what could I do? His head was in there!

Axell clawed at the creature as it snaked its lariat tail around his throat and took an anchorage. Stumbling, now blind, the sorry little man grasped at the bony limbs clamped around his head.

I took the weight of the Marine weapon in my left hand and coiled my right arm around Axell's waist. He wasn't limp—he was still staggering. I steered him toward the ramp just as another deployment of the ship's weapon turned the air green around me. This time it didn't knock me down. I felt the tingle on my flesh and grimaced at the burning sensation, but I was apparently close enough to the ship that it let me come in while still striking the nonhuman animals with its hard charge. The charge must be heavier farther out, like the ocean ripple that would eventually build into a tidal wave.

I dragged Axell as he began to lose the power of his own legs. I wrapped both arms around him, trapping him and the Marine weapon inside, and could barely close my arms around both. We shuffled toward the ship in a weird kind of sidestep dance. The scent of the scorpion-like animal clasping his face turned my stomach. Its knuckles brushed my cheek as I tried to bend away, and there was a squishing noise as it tightened its tail and its fingers around his head. So tight was the grip the pink flesh of Axell's neck and his scalp swelled up between the fingers. He went even more limp just as my foot touched the ramp and another hammering of energy blasted from the ship's spine above us, blanketing the curving rank

of face-huggers with another paralyzing strike. They curled into frying masses, and finally those who hadn't yet come into range gave up, rolled into tumbleweed, and unrolled running in the other direction. Finally, finally we had turned them back.

Axell collapsed in my arms and went completely limp, unconscious, without the slightest muscle tone. I lost my grip on him halfway up the ramp, but by then MacCormac and Carmichael were there to take over.

I turned and fired one more orange volley at the retreating scarecrows and crawled up the ramp. Theo cupped my elbow and pivoted me all the way inside, then hit the ramp controls and the ground disappeared beneath me. The huge metal ramp clacked shut and locked itself with a musical *chang*.

The landing party gasped and rolled in agony around me, still hammered by the protection bolt and just plain horrification. I fell to my knees beside Axell, then recoiled at the nearness of the face-hugger still clinging to him. Bonnie and the others, even the Marines drew back, away from the awful sight. Axell lay on his back, arms straight out, limp. The thing on his face was very much alive, tightening its noose around his throat and tensing its fingers around his head, as if it knew we were here and would challenge its catch.

Panting hard, MacCormac pushed himself off the ramp gears he was leaning on. He swung his weapon around from behind his leg and put the muzzle squarely on the spine of the face-hugger.

"No!" I shouted, but the weapon discharged a percussion blast that exploded on contact.

The face-hugger, and Axell's head, were blown to soup. In all my years of homicide investigations, I never saw that much blood. It sprayed out in a flat red streak along the entire walkway back to the

bay hatch, and took with it the green acidic fluid and tissue that an instant ago had been a victorious little cockfighter.

“God!” Bonnie screamed.

Clark belched “Jesus, MacCormac! Jesus! That was slaughter!”

“It was mercy!” MacCormac spat back firmly. “This is the standard procedure! We will terminate anybody who gets wrapped by one of these things. There’s no cure. No other course.”

“You can’t do this on my ship!” Clark protested.

MacCormac lowered his voice very deliberately. “I’ll do it anywhere and everywhere, Captain.” He lowered his weapon and wiped his face on his sleeve. “Anywhere and everywhere.”

Clark trembled as if MacCormac had actually physically slapped the sense into him.

We all stared at the remains of Axell’s detonated head and the stringy remains of the creature that had doomed him. Torn tubular parts of it were still moving, still searching, probing along the cold metal deck.

In that red streak of blood and skull fragments and brain tissue lay huge volumes of information about the ship’s computers and all its intertwined systems, and the memories of a reliable shipmate who didn’t say much, but could do much. The loss was alarming on many levels. I stared at the gory remains of yet another person who had saved my life today, whose life I then had failed to save. Twice in one day.

Clark shook his head, paced away, then paced back and almost fell over when he spun too quickly. “Theo,” he choked. “Scope, will ya?”

Theo, whose calm English voice I kind of wanted to hear right now, said nothing. He engaged a viewer just as the ship belched another bolt of its protective green broadband. We watched as a few

determined scorio-wigglers broiled in place while the last of those at the edge of the defense perimeter disappeared in retreat.

MacCormac grabbed Theo by the collar. "Where are Donahue and Brand? Did they report back? Are they in the ship?"

Theo braced against the Marine's big fist. "No—no answer."

"God damn it!" The commander threw Theo backward catching him on the ramp railing. "God damn it!"

"This . . . this . . . this . . . this is awful," Clark mourned. "It's clear we've got to get out of here. We're in over our heads. Those people must've had tragic ends . . . either they were implanted with the things that break out of the chests, or they were dragged away." He shook his head again, trying to think, to compose himself. "I don't want to add to the body count. Let's secure and prepare for launch as soon as we can deploy the poison-packers. Let's just . . . just get out of here. Let's just go."

"Wait a minute—wait!" I stood up and braced myself to stay standing. "The researchers are still out there. Maybe as many as forty people!"

"Aren't you watching?" Pocket demanded.

"We barely got back to the ship," Clark countered to me. "You said yourself they wouldn't have defended themselves and didn't have weaponry. We've got Marines, for God's sake, and we—we—" He waved his hand at the twitching corpses of Axell and the creature.

"They didn't die in that camp," I said. "They could still be alive."

"Add it up, detective!" MacCormac's anger came out in a string of spittle down his chin. "They're not even answering the hails. If you were stuck in this nightmare, wouldn't you *rush* to a possible rescue?"

"You don't know my mother."

Clark flapped his arms. "Nobody is the pathological nut you're describing!"

"Everybody is," I corrected. "You're here. I'm here. And somewhere out there, *they're* here. My mother can cultivate a martyr from raw material in about two weeks flat. I don't know how she spots 'em. Perfume, maybe."

He leveled a finger at my chest. "They're here because they were dragged away by those—"

"They weren't dragged away. They went on their own power."

"How can you be sure of that kind of statement?"

"The huts are empty. The camp is empty."

"Because they're dead! They got dragged away by aliens!"

"Did the aliens also drag away all their equipment?"

Sudden silence broke between us. In their minds they saw pictures of what I was describing. I saw in all their faces—in Pocket's squinty eyes, in Bonnie's sorrow, in Gaylord's fear, in Clark's desperation, the Marines' desire to go home heroes—that I had struck them hard.

"The survivors went somewhere," I pushed, probably too hard. I should've kept my mouth shut.

Clark pressed his lips tightly together, so tightly that his whole face screwed into a grimace. "They went somewhere . . . and died."

"You don't know that."

"They're not answering, Rory."

"You don't know my mother."

"This, again. You said yourself they probably didn't even defend themselves. They just let themselves get killed!"

"But they might've found a way to survive. They were all survivors by specialty. They spent all their time in jungles and deserts and arctic shelves and in wildernesses where nobody in his

right mind goes on purpose. You were too confident about being able to pull these people out quickly. You came unprepared."

"That's not a fair assessment at all."

"Yes, it is."

"You're not the expert here, Rory. You need to declare these people legally dead and let us get on with our mission to secure this planet for the good of Humanity."

"I don't care about Humanity. I care about this." I pulled out the wedding ring I'd hidden in my pocket. I held it up for him, and everyone, to see.

"Jewelry?" MacCormac scoffed.

"A wedding ring. I took it off the woman who hanged herself to keep from what was about to happen to her. If you don't know what that is, you're an idiot. I wish to hell I could ignore all this, but this ring is burning a hole in my pocket. I care about one person at a time. I don't ignore clues."

"Clue?" Pocket challenged. "What clue?"

"Like where's the dead woman's husband?"

Bonnie dared say, "Back on Earth, I hope."

"Where we'd like to be," Gaylord said.

"Except for one thing," I said. "She was pregnant."

Bonnie blinked. "Oh, that's right . . . oh, dear . . ."

"He's here, but he's dead somewhere," Pocket insisted. His ponytail bounced in emphasis.

I looked at him. "Maybe. But I want more reason to believe that. I want to find the second encampment. That's the condition. If we find a second installation and it looks like this one, then I'll sign off on all human life. But not without one more try. You get paid for accomplishing something, not for dumping and running. Without

my okay, all you get is your standard ferry pay. No big payoffs. You go home poor.”

I raised my voice enough for the whole crew to hear, all the people who had planned on this all-or-nothing get-rich-quick scheme. All of outer space was a get-rich-quick scheme, much to the disappointment of the adventurers and dreamers. Space had turned out to be an exclusive and expensive Old West dust bowl, and, lo, there wasn't gold in every stream. This was only my second time in space. Most people stayed on Earth. Some worlds were being terraformed, but it would take decades, if not centuries before those worlds would support flowering populations of any but the hardiest. The jury was still out on how successful the attempts would be. I knew that was why Clark was so charged up about being the one who landed the big fish—the golden planet we could move into without retooling.

And these people around me were the sad hopefuls of space. The do-gooders like Bonnie, the work-a-day guys with one bright chance like Clark, the compulsive gamblers with big debts like Pocket, the guys who couldn't use their skills anywhere else, like Gaylord. When it was your only shot, a long shot was a good shot. They were the crab fishermen of the space age, those who could go out for a few months, and make a fortune if things went well. If things didn't go well, then at least their families would collect if they died. The contract was also life insurance. But they only got the big bonus if the mission succeeded in its primary goals. Success, or at least its cruelest definition, this time depended on me. Damn it.

I let the silence work for a few seconds as they contemplated our situation in all its prismatics. If only it could be somebody other than me doing the talking. If only somebody else would take over my thoughts so I could just go hide.



And there was the other angle. None of them really wanted to abandon other people in this contaminated pit. I saw that behind their terror. I saw it as they blinked down at the hideous mess that used to be their weird little computer genius. How long had they worked with Axell? Who took care of him when he was sick, and who played cribbage with him during the long, boring, hours in space? Who among them had shared jokes with him and found a way to make the awkward fellow laugh and be at ease? Who had he helped when they needed a favor?

And there he was, smeared to hell. To some of them he might be saying, *"Get out of here while you can."* To others— like me—he said, *"Don't let this happen to anybody else."*

I turned to Clark as if we were alone. "You want me to sign off so you can release those automated killers to exterminate everything that's not native to this planet? There's no goddamn way, Clark. I can't keep you from leaving, but you're not releasing those robots. If you do, friend or no friend, I'll file charges against you when we get back. I'm not just here for a family reunion, you know. I've been hired. I'm the company cop. PlanCom doesn't want human lives on their consciences. It's a good company made up of a lot of hardworking people with families. They deserve not to have blood on their hands. I respect that. I like it, for a change in my life. It's why I took a job I didn't want or need. Personally, I wouldn't risk the clippings off my fingernails for my mother or my sister. I'm here for other reasons. I'm legally responsible. I'm gonna tell 'em you released the robots and if those researchers weren't dead, they sure are now. It's murder. That's the charge."

Pocket rewarded me with a disappointed glower. He ended his part of the discussion by pulling a tarp out of a locker and spreading it over Axell. Gaylord was slow to move, but took the edges of the

tarp and helped. Private Carmichael took Edney's arm and he and Bonnie disappeared into the ship, headed for the infirmary. Mark followed them. After a moment, Pocket and Gaylord also stiffly moved away. They, unlike my big mouth, couldn't find any words for this moment.

MacCormac remained a few moments longer, looking from me to Clark, me, then Clark again. I knew he was thinking about his own missing men out there. His face limned with bitterness, he snatched Berooz's big weapon from where it hung on my shoulder, and he too thumped into the depths of the ship.

Clark alone remained to scour me with resentment.

He stepped past me, on his way to the next few minutes and whatever they would bring.

"Guess you don't care if it's *our* murder."

\* \* \*

"What are you doing?"

"Going out after my men. Find my live ones and retrieve my dead one."

MacCormac hadn't taken long to decide his next course of action. In fact, I think he knew what he was going to do before he even left the ramp.

Nobody wanted to lay eyes on me right now, so I was avoiding everyone. Hard to do on a ship, especially when I knew something had to happen, and fast if there was to be any hope for the two missing Marines.

I found the colonel in the mess area, where the guests' lockers and weapons racks were kept. He was loading up. Grenades, shock sticks, flamethrowers, bloodhound sensor helmet, the works. I'd been aboard with this guy for weeks before the cryo sleep, and a

period after, and far as I could tell he had no personality at all. He spoke in a series of short descriptions or orders. Otherwise his dialogue consisted of single syllables whenever possible. He never socialized with the crew. But neither did I, so . . . *hmm*.

He packed armor onto his body with angry slaps and tugs, taking out his frustrations on preparation. I didn't close in on him, in fact stayed as far away as the narrow cabin would allow. He didn't look as if he could take much proximity right now. He also didn't radiate any desire for condolences, even though I was pretty sure he could've used them.

"Don't you think we should send out some remote drones first?" I asked. "Scout the area?"

"We don't have the right kind aboard. We didn't expect to have to search."

"Hindsight is so you can see what an ass you've been," I said. "If we lose you, we're screwed to the wall. Edney's wounded and Carmichael's a kid."

"He's a Marine. Don't underestimate him."

"I saw him stop from a full run and turn into the face of those things. He stood his ground and still managed to wait for the order to fire. I won't be underestimating him."

"He's supposed to stand his ground."

"What we're supposed to do and what we do when we feel the fire on our faces are two different things."

He snapped on a very serious looking cartridge belt with some kind of armaments I hadn't seen before. "You did it too."

"Only after I saw him do it. And you. Even Edney, wounded—"

"Go away, detective. I don't want to talk to you."

"Yeah, I know. Who's going out with you?"

"You volunteering?"

"I'd rather not." Good question—what was I probing for, exactly?

"Yeah?" He slammed the locker shut and thumped around to face me, peering at me from inside the perfectly fitted helmet. "Well, you'd better. You're the one who wants to do the snooping around. If you don't go out there, you'll never know for sure. Seems to me, after that performance at the ramp, you better have the guts to find out."

A clunking sound behind me almost scared the skin off my neck.

It was Carmichael, in full combat gear. "Ready, sir."

He had a little boy voice and little boy eyes peeking out from that helmet. Made me sick.

"You're taking this boy out there?"

MacCormac's eyes turned to angry slits. "He's a *Marine*."

My eyes shifted between him and Carmichael. I would've said more, except what choice did he have? Berooz was dead, Edney was in the infirmary, and Donahue and Brand were missing.

Missing . . . how could they just be missing? The ship's defensive shock weapon worked—we knew that. No living creature with DNA other than human DNA could get inside the perimeter. All the Marines would've had to do was run back up the ramp. Theo was standing right there to open it and close it after them. Constant presence in the ship was mandatory.

I thought back to Theo's call to the landing party. He had said something was going on, the Marines were missing, but he said nothing about the ship's defense lighting off or any other outward sign of trouble. He'd have mentioned that, wouldn't he?

"I know I'm going out," I told him. "I'll do my own dirty work. I need some protective gear. Can I have . . ."

My gesture toward his red body-armor suit was less than decisive.

He just stared at me as if I'd asked to wear his personal jock strap.

"Got any spare issue?" I requested.

Inwardly smoldering—well, actually outwardly too— he bit his lower lip to bottle his fury and kicked a locker. When he was done abusing it, he opened it and pulled out a red padded combat suit. "Put this on. Take Berooz's HPB. You already know how to use it . . . what the hell."

I fumbled some, but finally found the way to get into the suit. I had to take off everything but my underwear first—it was body-tight and formfitted, almost like an exoskeleton, lightweight, but strong. Strong enough against acid?

"They should've sent synthetics or robotics into this situation . . . urban environment, canyons . . . grottos . . . like a hollowed-out hive . . . Whose bright idea was it to send human researchers? Nah—never mind. I just answered my own question."

"How are we going to avoid another stampede by those scorpion things?"

"I don't know." He buckled and belted, snapped and booted himself into additional protective and assault gear. "Maybe by going out right now, after they've been stung, I guess, I don't know."

"How far will we go?"

"Wherever it takes to get to that second disaster you want to confirm. You set up the rules, not me. Hope you like 'em in action, pal."

"Don't know what I'll like," I said. "Not here to like anything."

One of the Marines stomped into the locker area, and only when he cast a mighty large shadow did I realize it couldn't be Edney or Carmichael. It was Clark, dressed up in one of those protective suits.

He said nothing to me, but that didn't stop me from whirling around and catching him by the elbow.

"What are you doing?" I asked. "Why are you wearing that?"

"What do you think?" His voice was raspy and worn.

"You're not going out there again—"

"What do you think, Rory? I have to go. I have to earn my 'big bonus,' remember? Pal?"

"I didn't mean anything like that."

"Doesn't matter what you meant, does it?"

"Why don't you let the Marines and me handle this? We'll go out after the other Marines and I'll—"

"Why you? You're just along for the ride."

"Come on. I'm the legal officer. I'm also a cop. It's my job to take risks for somebody else."

"This isn't Milwaukee or Chicago," he said. "You're not a cop here."

"Believe me, don't I wish."

"Well, then take a nap or something."

Aware of MacCormac over there putting things on himself and checking his suit, I didn't want to embarrass Clark or diminish his authority. Still . . . I didn't have time to train him in urban warfare, either.

"It's a bad idea for you to go, Clark," I said, flat-out.

"You're a real catalogue of bad ideas today, aren't you?"

"The ship needs you," I pointed out. "We can't lose the captain."

"We can't lose anybody else," he insisted. "I'm not stupid. I made sure everything can happen without me. Theo, Gaylord, Barry, and Mark are all capable of launching and getting the ship back to Earth. If a ship can't function without its captain, the captain isn't very good."

Knowing I was bound to lose this round, I pressed anyway. "Why don't you just let me do what I know how to do? If you go out there

with us, I'm going to be concentrating on protecting you, whether either of us likes it or not. I don't want to concentrate on you. I only have these two eyes."

"So don't go out."

He knew what I was talking about. The details didn't need saying and the point didn't need repeating. I'd bullied him, I'd guilted him, I'd shamed him, and now he was paying me back.

"Fine," I said. I turned back to the locker, yanked off my jacket, and tried to figure out the red body armor.

Clark kept going out into the bay.

MacCormac snapped a buckle very loudly. He was shaking his head in annoyance and disgust.

No time like the present. I dropped my trousers and pulled on the tougher, tighter pants of the Marine suit. "Colonel, how are you at taking advice?"

"Like what?" he grunted.

"The retrieval. Give it up."

His narrowed eyes scraped me. "What?"

"Leave Berooz where he is. He belongs to this planet now. If you lose more people trying to retrieve a body, you'll never forgive yourself, any more than they'll ever forgive me now."

His glare was utterly cheerless. The blue eyes were pure ice. Other than a slight twitching of his compressed lips, his thoughts were completely masked.

When he spoke, I think he surprised us both. Me, anyway.

"Yeah . . . all right."

It was a big step, agreeing to leave the fallen behind. Some of us—field officers, soldiers, cops—we just didn't like giving the bad guys the satisfaction. And we wanted something to bury. For the mothers, y'know. For the kids, so they could see that we care.

I admired him for giving it up. Sentimentality is hard to abandon when it's all you have. Here he was, in a situation he was supposed to be controlling, and he'd already had one of his troops killed, two missing, and one wounded. He'd kicked the locker, but he wanted to kick himself. Or me.

We dressed in silence. Then he checked my weapon, checked his, and I followed him into the bay. The land of glass was waiting.

\* \* \*

We circled the ship. Its big boxy body was completely out of place in this world of rose glass. It was dull, black, marked with logos and graffiti, painted with murals and silly pictures by crewmen who had victoriously returned to Earth. It was their reward. Their mark. And in space, it wasn't like anyone was actually seeing the ship.

Kinda sad, really. As I circled the big dazzle-painted body, I sort of wanted other people to see it and witness the graffiti of her many crews over the years. Big old ship . . . dependable and purposeful. She'd kept us alive in the universe's most hostile environment—space—only to have our lives suddenly at immediate risk down here. I thought back to the moment of landing and what a relief it had seemed to be to touch solid ground again.

I followed MacCormac, with Clark behind me and young Carmichael once again bringing up the rear guard. We moved in a curve around the ship, and spiraled outward, moving between the glass pillars, trying to keep our eyes on each other, which quickly became very difficult in the bands of prismatic light and shadows. I tried to keep track of them by the sounds of their footsteps on the skulch. Soon that, too, was almost impossible.

Only a ten minute search proved that the two missing Marines, Donahue and Brand, were not in the inner areas of the ship's



protection grid. We had no choice but to spiral outward toward the limits. Back at the ship, Theo once again stood waiting at the switch, ready to drop the ramp that had been tightly closed behind us. We'd heard of instances when these alien creatures had sneaked aboard ships. That wasn't going to happen to us.

Soon I was as good as alone in the glass forest. The red pillars with their gauzy hats laughed at daylight. I might as well have been in a basement with one lost light bulb trying to show my way.

I turned one of the many non-corners and felt even more isolated. With the Marine weapon pulled tight to my body, I tried to calm myself by running through the process for shifting it from projectile shot to flamethrowing to energy burst. That didn't last long. What invaded my mind instead was the vision of those spider-scorpion things rushing on their extended fingers toward us in a wide, flat stampede.

I hadn't come here to die. Who had? My stomach was inside out, all my muscles twitching with strain of tension. Better be careful—if one of our team came around the wrong way at me, I'd easily have sheered his head off before even noticing that I'd fired the HPB. I slid my shoulder along the trunk of one of the larger glass pillars, wider than an old oak tree on Earth. The glass radiated heat against me just from the way it caught the sun's light. No—that couldn't be right . . . this one wasn't in any direct light.

I twisted to look up. The sun wasn't touching this pillar at all. Could the glass somehow be holding heat? Maybe it wasn't glass at all?

Daring to take one hand off the HPB, I pressed my palm to the ruby pillar. Heat . . . there was heat inside. More than in the air. So they did hold heat somehow. They weren't ordinary glass.

As I felt the glass, I took another step. The long darker striations deep inside the pillar suddenly came together into a single form through the prism effect.

I froze. There was someone on the other side of this pillar. Something?

The red glass cast a distorted form through itself. Elongated and thin as if seen in a funhouse mirror, the shape was taller than I was. My heart came up into my throat.

Above the stumpy shoulders, there seemed to be a head. Round like a human, not elongated like a zucchini. But was I seeing from the correct angle? If the head turned, would it elongate? Was it a trick of reflection?

My hands turned suddenly cold and trembled all the way to the elbow. I wanted to call out, to see if the being answered with Clark's voice or one of the Marines. Years of experience in city streets held me silent. Calling out to your partner could get one of you killed. Never give away your advantage. Especially if all you have is the one.

In an instant of dread, I realized I was leaning back on the glass column, putting my weight against it. Bad—if I had to move—

And my boots were in the crunchy ground litter. I tried to shift my weight forward, to stop leaning, without moving my feet. The trillions of broken-up skeletons was to the enemy's advantage. My own boots would give me away, and I couldn't think of any way around that.

The dark form wasn't moving—or was it? The light kept changing, the shape flickering.

*Think . . .*

My lungs hurt. Jackass! I was holding my breath!

It was the worst thing I could be doing! Now there was no way to avoid a noisy draw through my nose or mouth to start breathing again!

I formed my lips into an “O” and very slowly drew as silent a breath as possible. Let it out . . . take another . . . my lungs started working again, but it took half my concentration.

The dark, thin form on the other side shifted in flickers of interacting light and shadow.

“Stay in sight, Carmichael.” MacCormac’s voice from over a hill nearly cracked my brain in half. They were somewhere up the grade. “Where’s Malvaux?”

I didn’t speak up. I hoped they didn’t call out or come down here looking.

MacCormac was being smart. He kept his voice down, barely enough to hear. “Captain Sparren, your location?”

“Over here.” Clark’s voice was nowhere near the others, but seemed closer to me.

That terrorized me. He could be walking into a trap.

Adding to the terror was another simple fact. The form on the other side of my pillar wasn’t any of them.

“Detective Malvaux, sound off.” MacCormac kept his voice down, but if I answered we’d both be compromised.

Petrified, I had to either move or get the shadow to move. If I didn’t act, Clark or one of the Marines could come stomping down here in to a trap.

Slowly I unstuck my left hand from the weapon and scooted my butt down the glass pillar, down more, bending my legs without shifting my feet. With my clammy hand I scooped up a handful of the skulch.

I took three short breaths. One, two, three—and threw the skulch at the next pillar, across the body of the dark form. When the broken skeleton bits rattled against the glass, drawing attention away from me and across the path, I jumped out under cover of the rattle and took aim.

The dark form didn't move. I fell back against the other pillar, shouldered my weapon, and choked, "Oh— Christ! *Christ!*"

In front of me was the wretched sight of Marine Private Donahue, propped up against the pillar, pinned to it by the throat. Embedded in the poor man's neck was a gray-brown spike, driven through his throat and into the glass pillar. The young man's wide face was paste-white, eyes beseeching the sky for help. One hand hung on the spike. His last few seconds had played out trying to pull the offender out.

The spike was sharply pointed, then grew wider into a series of leathery spinal segments. It sloped down to a disembodied wound of its own. It had been cut off nine or ten segments down. It was a tail.

"Aw, no . . . " Clark came around the pillar at the same time MacCormac and Carmichael showed up.

Carmichael took one glance and wheeled away, nauseated.

"Aw . . . this is despicable." Clark shook his head and said, "Aw," four more times before he ran out of energy.

MacCormac grasped the atrocious tail section with both hands, put his foot against the pillar, and yanked the spike free. Donahue's body jerked almost as if he felt the change, and he collapsed to the ground. With a heave of anger, MacCormac sent the tail section spinning off down a gulley. We heard a faint crunch as it landed somewhere out of sight.

"Looks like he . . . got a shot off." Sucking air through his teeth, MacCormac checked the weapon fallen at Donahue's feet. "Must've cut this off just as it hit him."

"Can we get out of here now?" Clark moaned.

"What about Brand?" I asked.

"We can't keep collecting corpses, Rory, please . . ."

"Clark, I wish you'd go back to the ship."

"Let's all go back. Please."

"No," MacCormac said. "We keep searching . . . a little longer."

The poor man was shattered. The image of the heartless soldier wasn't being honored here. He didn't have much personality, but he sure felt his losses.

"Everybody stay together from now on." The colonel didn't really seem to know what else to do, or what more to do. He fell back on his training, as I did. He turned away from the body of Donahue, to keep his eye on Carmichael, over there, shattered.

"Why didn't the protection blast go off?" I asked. "If he was killed while we were still down at the camp or the pod nest, why didn't it light off when he was attacked?"

MacCormac looked anguished. "Guess we're just at the edge . . ."

"It might be the landscape and all the reflections," Clark suggested unhappily. "The ship might not be able to read . . . aw, hell . . . we're in over our heads . . ."

"Give me that com unit!"

Quaking with fury, I snatched the link out of his hand before he even had a chance to extend it to me. I thumbed the wide-band and shouted into the link, much louder than was safe.

"Mother, this is Rory. This isn't right for you to do to us. We came to help. Speak up!"

Truth be told, I didn't expect to hear anything. I was ready not to. If nothing had come, I would've given Clark the confirmation he wanted. We were seconds from that.

The com unit began to hum and its indicator light panel flickered, signs that a signal was being broadcast and being received.

Another crackle, and then we heard a human voice. My mother's voice. The angel of doom and the angel of salvation, all rolled into one phantom.

*"Turn due north of your position. Come two hundred meters down the flume, then take the west fork another sixty meters. Hurry. They're moving toward you."*

# 5

You know how, every once in a while in your life, you get the feeling that life really is alive and it has a sick sense of humor? When I accepted this job, the general mission statement was straightforward and seemed to solve a bunch of problems. I had to get away from a few things for the good of the department, let things cool off, Clark needed a legal officer for the mission because somebody had to sign off on the condition of the research team before the poison-packers could legally be released to cleanse the planet of all alien DNA, and Clark personally wanted my help dealing with my mother and my sister, who were not the two most compliant women in history. My presence on the *Vinza* seemed to be a good thing all around, and when I agreed to come along, the mission didn't seem as if it would disturb my life much. We'd be in cryo a large portion of the time, then a quick in and out, and more sleep to get back home. By the time I came out of the months-long hideaway, the storms of my actions would have blown over.

Not that there was so much to disturb. No girlfriend, a job but not a career, taking every day as it came. The best part of my life had been the three bitter, frustrating years tracking the murderer of my

fellow officer and finally catching the guy. Of course, that was when my real troubles had begun. Everybody was on my side except the law.

What could I do? Fight that which I'd spent my life defending? I didn't want to fight. I was guilty and I liked it. Some things need doing. I tried to be remorseful, but it was like trying to make yourself throw up when you just don't need to.

So I didn't bother. I said I was guilty, I wanted to take the lumps, but the department wanted to stick up for me. For that, the air had to be cleared and the lightning rod was better gone for a while.

Here I was, wandering an alien land, lost as a baby chick. I'd come around a pillar and between two more, and now I couldn't find Clark or the Marines.

We'd heard my mother's warning and followed it, moving down the flume, but MacCormac had done his job and made us move with controlled retreat instead of rushing panic. We'd spaced ourselves out, with the Marines going first to sweep the area in case we ran into anything dangerous, then Clark after, then me in the rearguard. After two turns, I realized I was in trouble. I'd lost the sight of others in front of me.

And I heard something. A constant crunching noise. I crept down a gritty slope, hoping not to fall or skid out of control. The skulch was dangerously slippery on anything but flat ground, as poor Berooz had found out the hard way. Somehow I had ended up alone, which was the main thing we had been trying to avoid. I assumed it was my fault. I'd sneaked off after another shadow in the red glass.

*"Go to your right, Rory. Five feet. There's a hiding place."*

"Where are you?" I asked, keeping my voice down.



*"You turned down the wrong path. You have to hide. Get down on the ground. There's a slab you can crawl under. And don't speak anymore."*

The com unit buzzed slightly. How could she know what was happening? They'd planted observation devices, obviously, but I didn't see anything mounted anywhere. That told me something—that the researchers had some idea the aliens might recognize a camera unit. There was indeed a slab, and I'd almost missed it. I dropped to the ground, discovering a flat dugout under the slab which didn't fit the rest of the path's floor. It had been dug by humans and formed perfectly to fit my entire length. I shimmied in, weapon and all, making sure to pull the weapon all the way inside with me and leave no clue. What about my footprints and the scratchings as I'd crawled in? I had to hope for the best.

The crunching noise was louder now, and steadier. I stayed still and flat. I had to force myself not to shift or readjust, to press my toes into the skulch, keep my arms right where they were, despite the sharp ground pressing into me. My heart pounded downward into the planet.

At my eye level, only four or five inches over the ground, there was a separation under the glass slab, through which I could see the path I'd just come down. The path crossed my hiding place and went off to my right, on down to unknown destinations. To the left was the way back to the abandoned camp and the ship. They seemed a thousand miles away right now. Too far to do any good, like Earth.

I heard sounds loud enough now that I knew the source was within a few feet of me. Not footsteps, but the constant crunching noise, steady, but somehow varied. Many of the same type of sound. I recognized it after a few seconds— tires on gravel. Did the researchers have vehicles here?

The crunching noise came around the pillars and up the path. Black forms rolled past. Each roll left a residue of mucus behind to pull up in strings behind it. The silvery strings stretched longer and longer, until the next roller came along and snapped them. I caught a glimpse of shiny armor and quivering lips not quite closed over silver teeth.

Aliens . . . big ones. Adults.

They moved only inches from my hiding place. I tried to keep my sanity by counting them. Three . . . seven . . . ten . . . twelve—I couldn't keep up. Couldn't concentrate past the slamming of my heart as it tried to dig underground and hide.

They made a noise, these aliens, a noise other than the crunching sounds as they rolled. They made a soft hiss, uneven, overlapping. Respiration? Exertion? Or some kind of warning system to foolish beings who might be in their path?

Like tank treads the aliens' flexible bodies rolled past me. Through my four-inch-tall slit I saw their long, armored tails curled around in the shape of pneumatic tires, and how their zucchini heads fit into the slots of that bodily curve. I wished I could roll away too.

Then a black foot came down only inches from my face, heavily cabled with long brown Dracula claws and a spike out behind the heel. It ground into the skulch, then moved on, sucking bits of skeletal gravel, then dropping them to bounce into my eyes. The one walking wasn't dragging his tail, the lower curve of which swished up close and bumped the glass stone which cloaked me.

Dinosaurs . . .

*"You're not very observant, are you, Rory?"*

*"Not as much as you, I guess."*

*"M'am."*

*"M'am . . . "*

*"Look at the difference. There was a time during early television and movies when dinosaurs were portrayed dragging their tails on the ground behind them. The hordes accepted the vision without question. That's what hordes do. Then, one day, an astute scientist looked at fossilized dinosaur tracks, I believe brontosaurus, and he asked the question any four-year-old should've been able to see clearly, 'Where's the mark made by the tail?' Since that moment, all images of dragging tails were wiped out. Dinosaurs were never again portrayed as sweeping great thick tails along the ground. We realized the tails were for balance and were never dragged. On that single day, all of science changed. All the perceptions of an entire ancient species changed in that one moment. Science always bends. Remember to bend."*

*"Yes, M'am."*

During this brief expedition into the crazed fear-reaction of a human mind, the last of the aliens rolled by and suddenly I was alone. Where were they on the move? What did beings like that travel after? Was there migration going on? Had they run out of food in one area and were looking for more somewhere else? Were they moving for food or for breeding purposes?

Where did this put them on the evolutionary line? I wished I were a scientist and could think of answers.

Being alone was a hundred times worse. For a terrible moment I wished the aliens would come back so I would at least know where they were. If I stood up, tried to move on, would I run flush into them? Would I turn the curve of a pillar and run into Clark's corpse the way I had run into Donahue's? Would my mother speak to me again over the com unit? Or would she change her mind and abandon me to my own devices? I honestly couldn't predict.

In the worst case, I'd be alone out here. Clark and the Marines would be gone, discovered, dead. I tried to mentally pace my way back to the ship, the shortest way, and horribly realized I didn't really know the way. I'd followed MacCormac and forgotten to read the street signs. I thought I remembered the way back . . . two bends, a long stretch of downward slope, a bend to the right . . . or was it two bends, one left, then right? And weren't there tracks around at least three columns the sizes of buildings?

God, I couldn't remember. If I went down the wrong track, made the wrong turn—

Thinking of myself again. What about Clark and the Marines? If they were only a few yards away, also hiding, would I be leaving them behind? Even worse, if I skulked away, they might do what we were doing—waste time looking for me.

I felt like a fool, like a jerk, taken in by a sense of honor that had never paid off once in my life. I'd had a chance to get the ship and its crew out of this mess and blown the gift of escape. There were too many ways to die down here, for sure.

But there were survivors too. I'd heard my mother's voice. They were here somewhere, cloaked. Somehow I didn't feel all that vindicated.

The silence almost drove me to screaming. I bit my lip to keep from calling out and running madly away in any direction until I dropped of exhaustion, to be covered by gauze and eaten by weevils. I physically fought to get a grip on myself and only partly succeeded. Five minutes passed—or was it twenty? Eight—or thirty? I had no idea how long I lay there in paralyzing terror. Seconds, maybe. Panic isn't a good judge of time.

No matter how I played with time, the aliens didn't come back. They were headed in some direction for their own purposes, not just

roaming around looking for me. Still, I had no way to know their behavior. Maybe they had rearguards. Maybe I'd still be caught.

Finally I found the nerve to shimmy backward out of my flat hiding place. When my head cleared, I almost dove back in, but managed to force myself to my feet.

Maybe heroes get scared. I don't know. Don't care.

"Where are you?" I hissed, caught between wanting to yell out and wanting not to make a sound at all. "Answer me . . . somebody speak up, please, this isn't funny . . ."

No answer. I didn't dare raise my voice.

I looked for footprints, but the black skulch revealed nothing but the telltale scratching of the aliens as they had rolled past.

"Ssssst."

At the sound, which came from behind me, I spun and brandished my weapon, only to find there was nothing at which I could fire. Nothing but glass and skulch. But I knew I'd heard something. I *knew*.

The prospect of being stalked shot through me like electricity and that pounding heart darned near stopped. The wall of pillars, almost a solid wall before me, rippled and shimmered with such vigor that I was sure my vision was leaving me.

The planetscape before me turned flat, turned two-dimensional, and began to separate from itself, coming apart as if it were being unzipping from the top. My eyes were blinded by a sudden blue light, completely uncharacteristic for the land and sky here, obviously artificial and harsh. I wanted to stumble back, but my legs froze and now I couldn't even see.

I made another mistake—took one hand off my weapon to shield my eyes from the blue light. In that shameful instant the weapon flew out of my grip and I was defenseless. Forces grabbed me from

both sides, both arms, and I was propelled forward into a sudden coolness. The sheet of sweat on my face turned abruptly chilly and I fell forward, knocked flat by the forces at my sides. Twisting over onto my back, I lashed out with both feet and nearly panicked when my weapon was yanked out of my hands.

"It's okay, Rory! Rory, stop! Stop! Knock it off!"

Clark's voice. He sounded okay, in some control.

My eyes cramped at the blue light and the sudden dimness around me. Somebody hauled me to my feet. Clark leaned on me from the right, and total strangers from the left. I shook them off.

"We're secure, Rory," Clark told me. "We're in a blind of some kind, hidden. We're completely masked."

"Did you—see those—things that went by?" I shook my head, as if that would help my eyesight. "They weren't five feet away!"

"I saw 'em. Big suckers, aren't they?"

"Where are the Marines?"

"We have them in our south blind, down the hill," one of the strangers said. "Hi . . . I'm Neil, the camp director."

I blinked, and focused on a bald head, bushy blond eyebrows, and thin lips. Camp Director?

"What is this thing?" I asked. "What are we inside of?"

"It's a specialty cloaking hideaway," Neil said. "Our secondary camp site. The drapings of the camp are made up of thousands of micro-projectors that broadcast constant video of the landscape. It also masks sound and light. It's a good thing you moved close enough for us to pull you in. We don't want to give our position away."

"Who's 'we'?" I asked.

I pushed Clark aside to look, as well as I could manage, at the people who had until now been mysteriously absent. The

researchers of the Malvaux Special Observation Expedition Team.

And there they were, seven . . . eight of them, standing before me. Like toddlers or gorillas, they gawked at me without the slightest social restriction. The rangy gaggle of researchers were all dressed in worn khakis, torn red rags in the shape of ponchos, or some kind of neon blue jumpsuit that I didn't recognize as field gear. How anybody could skulk around on a red glass planet in a blazing blue suit, I had no idea. Several of them wore those bracelets and anklets made of the glass-beaded macramé I'd seen on the body in the hut.

And here they were, bearded, scruffy, beaded, hair grown out, no combs in sight, faces pale from lack of exposure. Like missionaries living in a remote jungle tribe, they'd gone native.

And right in the middle of them, as if standing a post, was my sister. For a second I didn't recognize her. Her hair was twice as long as the last time I'd seen her, and braided in three long strands, one hanging over each shoulder, and, as she turned to glance deep into a man-made corridor to her left, another braid down her back. Rebecca of Scarybrook Farm.

"Gracie," I said. "Hey."

She scoured me with cold eyes. "You're out of your mind to come here."

"You too. Where's M'am?"

"She's on her way from the south entrance, with your clunky asshole clubfooted triggerhappy military hit-men whose lives we just had to save at our own expense."

I sighed in relief. "They're not dead? How many?"

"Two. And they should be, along with you and your klutzy pal, here." She gestured at Clark, who dipped his head in embarrassment.

Only two. There were three Marines out—MacCormac, Carmichael, and Brand.

“Where are they?”

“Right here, sir!” Private Carmichael’s voice drew my attention to a man-sized opening in the blind’s back wall. This whole room, which seemed like a central gathering area, was maybe twenty feet by twenty, probably made to fit a natural opening in the cave formation. My mother was always good at making use of existing land features. There were three tunnel openings, leading off who-knows-where. The place didn’t seem all that secure, shielded from the dangerous outside by basically a hightech curtain, but then survivalists learn to be comfortable with flimsy cloaks.

Carmichael came out first, grinning with fascination at our surroundings, then MacCormac, and right beside MacCormac’s big over-dressed bulk was the diminutive and yet dominating form of my mother, the elegant and attention-commanding luminary Jocasta Malvaux.

She was smaller than I remembered. Growing up with her, she’d always seemed about six feet ten. One day as a teenager I overtook her, and discovered that she just acted tall. Walked tall. Made people believe she was tall. She had golden hair done like an old-time movie star, shoulder-length and off the brow. She was one of those people whose bone structure and complexion, the set of her lips and brows were classic enough that she could step out of a sauna, half melted, and look stunning. Everyone in the room became very still, as if royalty had entered, and she played off that. Being the center of attention was her best thing. Her glamorous and gracile elegance came out in a magical charisma that made people want to be near her and “yes” her and somehow chip a word of approval from her.



Even unadorned in this wilderness environment, she was striking. Face to face with her, I was suddenly eight years old again.

"You wanted him," Gracie said to her. "Here he is. Now how do we get rid of him?"

Our mother never took her eyes off me. Her expression was complex, a combination of nostalgia and dismay. She spoke in that scholarly and slightly removed Quebec accent that was almost not there at all, but just present enough to punctuate her words with a *française* patina.

"Graciella," she lubricated, "be more welcoming to your only brother."

Gracie shrugged. "Yes, M'am."

Our mother created a special zone for herself as she moved forward through the gaggle of researchers, to approach—but not too close—me.

"Rory," she began. "Are you well, dear?"

"M'am," I greeted flatly. "Why didn't you answer our hails when we first arrived?"

She tipped her head. "Anger at first sight."

"We've lost people already. They'd still be alive if you'd spoken up."

"We don't run the wide-range transceivers unless we have to. We've been in seclusion for months. Why waste the energy?"

"And nobody heard or felt the ship land?"

"Actually, no. We were napping."

I sensed Clark and the two Marines as they measured every nuance, and decided I couldn't win. She'd have an answer for everything.

"Well, roll everybody out of bed and give me a head count," I said, "because we're leaving now."

"We have to launch soon, Mrs. Malvaux," Clark instructed without embellishment. "Every additional minute on this planet is risky."

"The sooner, the better," she agreed. "But you won't be making any actions outside the blind yet. The Xenos are on the move. You have to wait until after sunset, when they go underground for the ambient radiation during the cool night. Then, we'll be happy to accommodate your hurry. Your appearance here has compromised our work."

"How's that?"

"Your clumsy arrival has risked our carefully constructed veil of secrecy and stirred up the local population of animal life. We've been in ideal seclusion for many months, Captain. Time and great care have been taken to retreat into the environment so efficiently that the Xenos have forgotten we're here at all. Unable to find us, they ultimately went back to their natural behavior and we've been able to study them interacting with each other instead of int—"

"How many of your team were killed," I interrupted, "before those creatures 'ultimately' went back to nature?"

My mother's sophisticated eyes narrowed slightly, as if scolding me. The look was too familiar. "Your ship's landing and your crass actions have tipped them off to our presence here. You've disrupted months of exacting behavior on our parts. We've learned to completely disguise our presence h—"

"I want to know, and right now, how many out of the original fifty-two are still alive. Tell me now, M'am. This isn't a visit."

She paused. "You'll interpret the information negatively."

"You're avoiding the inevitable."

"It's my responsibility to avoid misunderstanding of our work here. There are always casualties."

"How . . . many . . . are dead?"

"M'am," Gracie uttered.

I couldn't tell whether she meant to encourage or to warn.

"Nine," my mother said. "We've lost nine."

"The same nine we found at the camp? That nine?"

Her cheeks flushed, but only a little. I thought I might have caught her in a lie, and watched the others as a barometer. Nobody else flinched. I scanned them quickly, looking for bad poker faces.

"Nine," she said.

"How did they die? We saw what happened to the bodies inside the huts. How did they get caught so quickly? And what happened to the ones outside?"

"They made mistakes," she told me openly. "This environment takes getting used to."

"What kinds of mistakes? We need to know right now, so we don't make them."

My direct questions bothered everybody, I could tell. This wasn't the socially approved norm, where you walk in and take a while to get to know what's going on and gradually inquire about a few things at a time. Her followers were shocked by my grilling of this iconic woman whom they so completely respected and whom they asked for permission to ask a question before asking it.

My mother kept her cool, though I could sense the seething fury below the surface, only by experience.

"Our chemist, Amelia Forbish, went out without her scent masking. Donald Kent and Richard Hochleitner went out after her without checking the area first for stalkers. Several weeks later, Samantha North tried to make an impression upon us by setting up more video feeds than she had been assigned. She was always too bold. Niko Refinado went out alone after we made a policy of a

buddy system. He never respected them enough. He made mistakes. Then he made one too many. It goes on like that. I will give you all the information you need for your records. You have no cause to cross examine before there has been an examination."

She was good. I couldn't think of a response. It's hard to grill a person who is seeming to cooperate.

"The arrival of your ship has compromised our work," she went on. "Hiding will be much harder now that you've tipped them off. We made hiding an art. A way of life. If you'd kept away, we could've gone on for years. Now we have to deal with this setback. Unfortunately, we do have something of yours." She turned to a very large bearded gentleman with a decidedly Bigfoot countenance, "Zaviero, show them."

Bigfoot glanced at Clark, at me, then MacCormac and Carmichael. "You sure they won't get mad?"

"Well, of course they'll get mad, dear," Ma'm said soothingly, but logically. "Go ahead. They won't be mad at you."

Could this prehistoric lox actually be a scientist of some kind? Or was he just the bouncer?

"Just don't want anybody to be mad." Zaviero stomped to a storage area with several tote-able containers with the same footprint, many covered with black tarps. He pulled back one of the tarps with a swish, like a magician's assistant making a dramatic reveal.

There, on top of a group of unevenly stacked containers, lay Marine Private Brand, dumped there on his side. His eyes were closed and his mouth slightly open, as if he were sleeping. He wasn't. Around his throat was a long, segmented, whiplike cord, very familiar since we'd just had a few hundred of them whipping at us during the crawler stampede. At the end of the garrote hung a

dead face-hugger, its fingers hopelessly broken in several places so that they splayed out in every unlikely direction.

Clark moaned. "Another one . . ."

"How did this happen?" MacCormac demanded, boiling with rage. "Did this thing kill him?"

"We think they killed each other," my mother explained. "He must have been a very good soldier to break all its limbs while it was strangling him. You should be proud."

MacCormac grimaced in bitter dismay. He seemed tragically helpless.

I stepped closer, but Zaviero suddenly moved to block me from getting too close to the body. He seemed to want to protect the dead man from disrespect or disturbance.

"Where was he found? Inside or outside the ship's protection grid?"

"We know nothing about your ship's blasters," my mother denied. "He was found at the bottom of a gradient. He seems to have fallen while fighting for his life. He almost tumbled right into one of our holographic projectors. It would've been a disaster for the rest of us if he had. He could've compromised our entire southern blind system. Gracie, it's time for dinner. Oliver, make sure we have enough for our guests and that they have a chance to clean up. I'm sorry there's neither water nor is there hot food, but we can offer cleansing methods and sustenance. We eat only indigenous plant fibers and curds. We take protein supplements, but there's no cooking because of the chance of compromising our scent masks."

Clearly disturbed and out of his element, Clark fell back on his responsibility as the flight captain of this mission. I felt for him as he cleared his throat and forced himself to speak. "Mrs. Malvaux, I have a court order—"

"Please," she said sharply. "No discussions yet. We must eat dinner. You must understand, Captain, that we keep our sanity through our human social rites. We eat, we pray, we retain our humanity. You cannot go back to your ship until there is quiet in the countryside. Until then, please try to relax and mourn your loss. He will be disposed of in our way, appropriately, and in a sanitary manner that attracts no attention. Oliver is our chef and will be serving dinner in forty-five minutes."

A little spooked at my mother's ability to speak so fluidly of dead people and dinner in the same breath, Clark shifted on his feet. "Well . . . I'll have to notify my chief mate about what's going on."

"You may not make any communication," my mother told him. "The Xenos have methods of wave detection. We must not take that risk. Our lives depend upon silence. Your crew in the ship will not venture out on their own, correct?"

"They're not supposed to . . ."

Clark eyed me. I made a little warning scowl. I knew he expected me to ask her about the people in the huts, why they were locked inside. I didn't want to play that hand yet. There was too much emotion involved—the image of watching each other go through the abomination of being used as an incubator for the ulcerous little alien larvae, or whatever they were, watching your friends' bodies blown open and the pests scurrying out to freedom. It was a wonder they hadn't all hanged themselves.

"Then, fine. They'll wait." She made some nods and motions to her staff which I couldn't interpret. Some people stayed, while others disappeared through the three passages that linked this chamber to whatever else they'd built. I felt like I was inside a stomach. The dim place, lit by blue and white lanterns, was particularly unwelcoming. They seemed to settle down, but weren't comfortable with our

presence. One by one they found some way to occupy themselves with whatever they did here to pass time, or work, or whatever.

MacCormac and Carmichael stood side by side, looking at their dead comrade. Brand lay there on his side, guarded by Zaviero, in death with his assailant, looking horrendously like a child curled up with a favorite toy.

“One more for your count,” Clark rasped at me. “Hope you’re keeping track.”

\* \* \*

The chef, Oliver, and two or three others began to set up a dining table made out of boxes and panels. I found it a little Jocasta-esque that they had a “chef” and not just a “cook.” She had an odd talent for glorifying the menial. I think it was a way to elevate people in their own eyes, make them think *she* thought they were more valued by her than they actually were.

They obviously did this every night, like a ritual. There wasn’t much chit-chat, but that might have been because we were here. MacCormac and Carmichael settled down in desolation and waited out whatever would come next.

I watched all this for a few minutes, and decided to work the room. I started with a sad-sack character with a bad left eye. His right eye did the looking, and his left one kind of went off on its own, but that wasn’t what had drawn me to him. He was dressed in the red rags with some kind of glittering dust on them, which I assumed was some kind of crude camouflage, not exactly the height of technology. Probably one of the first things they developed, and now it had become fashion. Or just comfort, like a bathrobe.

The sad man just stood there uneasily as I approached him, and I flashed back to my days as a superskyway cop. Like somebody who

didn't know why he'd been stopped, he seemed both guilty and bewildered.

"Hi," I said, as friendly as possible. "I'm Rory Malvaux. What's your name?"

He hesitated, moving his mouth some, as if he weren't sure it was okay to speak to strangers. "Diego . . . bacteriology and virology."

"Funny last name." When he didn't smile, or even react, I ignored my own joke and let him off the hook. "Sorry about your wife."

He blinked, first surprised, then perplexed, and soon looked the way you'd expect him to look.

I pulled the wedding ring from my belt pack. "You probably want this."

He stared at the ring, but didn't take it. I had to reach out, nudge him, and place the ring in his hand. He simply stood there, looking down at it.

"Amelia dreamed of having an adventure for a honeymoon," he admitted. "Starting our lives by doing something like . . . something . . . historic."

"You did," I told him. "You had the guts to live your dream."

One shoulder went up, then sank again. "She died of dreams."

"Most dreams are dangerous," I said. "You're not the first."

He gazed at the ring until finally his fingers closed over it. "Thanks for bringing it to me. I thought about going for it. I couldn't make myself go in there."

"Now you don't have to."

I left him with his memories and went around a tall set of packed shelves to the next person. This aging bibliophile looked as if she lived in books and didn't know how not to. She was thin and flat, like a cut-out. I could've broken her by tripping those spindly legs. Yet, here she was, chosen for some reason of value to my mother's



discerning eye, and she'd actually come all the way out here. I wondered whether she—or any of them—really comprehended the kind of life they'd been offered, and were living out here. Had she talked to them about heroism and groundbreaking glory? About being the pioneers of science? No doubt.

Something told me my mother had left out the inglamorous bits, like having to bury your own excrement and peeing into special containers for re-purification later, then having to drink it.

Then again, maybe she'd been completely honest and they were just jerks.

"Hi, there. What's your name?" I asked.

She was afraid to answer, so she didn't. Probably hadn't spoken to anyone she didn't know for years.

"Go ahead, tell me," I prodded. "I have to check you off the list. I'll get in trouble if I don't. Help me out, huh?"

"I'm . . . Yuki. Tech and data specialist."

Anybody sensing a pattern? They each gave me a name, only one, and a specialty.

"Those are nice bracelets and the other beaded things there," I bridged. "How long have you been making those, Yuki?"

"Beading? I was eleven and a half. My aunt and uncle were hucksters. They had booths. Carnivals, shows, festivals . . . When I was bored my aunt showed me how to string beads. I guess I was talented, guided by spirits, just had a touch. Because my hands always pick the rights things . . . glass and stone . . . hemp . . . How did you know it was me who made them?"

"Your fingers are stained pink with the glass dust."

"That's really good." She smiled, showing little white pointy teeth. "Observant. You're really good."

"Have you been making much progress in this outpost?"

"With the beading?"

"Actually with the aliens."

"The Xenos?"

"What do you do concerning them? I mean, you're not here to make bracelets, are you?"

"No!" she laughed a little birdy laugh. "No, no! I mostly catalogue the new data. Dates and information, numbers, microdata analysis, complex applications . . . I process it all with programming . . . do comparisons . . . log results . . . crunch numbers . . ."

"Keeping you busy, huh?"

"Oh, yes, very."

"So do you get out much? Go outside?"

"Oh, never. Never. I never go out."

"Really? Why not?"

"I'd get killed. They won't let me go out."

"Protecting you, huh?"

"Sure. The other tech specialist is gone."

"Gone . . ."

"Long time ago."

"I see . . . so they need you."

"I'm very important."

"Bet you are. I might want to talk to you later. Would that be okay?"

"Talk about what?"

"Maybe you could show me some of what you do here."

"Oh. I don't know if I should do that."

"Well, we'll see. Okay?"

I left her, more disturbed than before. The idea that my mother would bring somebody like this woman out of the relative safety of

Earth and lock her up in this bizarre clinic . . . I felt all my buttons pushing themselves.

By the time I came around to a chubby, large-eyed black man whose age was indeterminate because of his porky face and body, which tended to distort a good judgment of age, he was already expecting to be next. He was slightly overweight, but I could tell he had been more overweight before and now had sallow, hanging jowls and wide but sallow eyes. He was tapping information into a computer module, but mostly he was watching me.

I sat down next to him on a makeshift bench.

"Hi. I'm Rory."

"You're Jocasta's son," he said. He had a very friendly tone. "When I first heard of you, I thought it would be stimulating to be her son."

"You probably are, more than I am. What's your name?"

"Ethan. Crowd and traffic dynamics."

"Hey, that's great. I'm a cop, so I'm always grateful for good traffic management. What do you do here?"

"I'm a traffic control technician. I analyze and predict crowd flow. Large numbers of individual components and how they move . . . stadiums . . . highways, airways, pedestrians, traffic . . . crowds . . ."

"Why would you be here, though? There's no traffic, is there? No crowds?"

"I count things. I keep track of things."

"Like those scorpion finger-runner aliens?"

"How . . . do you know about . . ."

"We were almost overrun by a stampede of them."

He pushed back in his chair, both hands fixed on the edge of the table. "You were? How many?"

"Not sure . . . hundreds."

"How wide was the channel?"

"I guess about twenty-five feet . . . why?"

He tapped his keyboard furiously, using nine fingers, because his middle finger on the right hand was missing at the knuckle. The stump had no bandage and was pink, but not red, so the wound wasn't recent. On the screen was a display of a twenty-five-foot-wide simulated canal. He must've had hundreds of such visuals programmed in, and without my telling him specifically where we had been when the crawlers assaulted us, he still pulled up a display of the right place. At least, it looked the same. Might've been my memory playing tricks, but I didn't usually get things like that wrong.

He tapped more, and suddenly the simulation was peppered with hundreds of little pencil drawings of the crawlers, once more racing at me. When the crawlers in front came through, the program automatically filled in more behind them.

"Did it look like this?" he asked.

"It sure did . . ."

He looked at me with some emotion stirring. "I've never seen them do that before."

"How many are there in your simulation?"

"If it looked like this, about seven hundred to fill the passage and bottle up at that point. You can see on the simulation that they're not slowing down and bottlenecking, but actually climbing up the walls and pillars to keep the same pace constantly flowing. They're working together, even though only one or two of them had a chance of implantation."

"Is that a sophisticated behavior, do you think?"

"Very sophisticated. I'm going to write a paper on it."

"Do they always behave that way?"

"I actually don't know. I've never seen them do this before."

I looked at him. "This is the first stampede?"

"The very first."

"Really . . . Listen, thanks for telling me this, and I'd love to see more of your research when we get the chance."

He shrugged and seemed proud. "If Jocasta clears it."

"Oh, of course. No problem."

He shrugged, jogged his shoulders, nodded. "You *are* her son. I guess I can show you some things."

"I'd love to see what you do." Actually, I got the idea he was dying to show me his work. Isolated as they were, these people never got to show off. And there was that little added factor which I didn't fail to pick up—being Jocasta's son just might work to my advantage. Ethan was having trouble saying no to me, and had quickly decided to say yes.

One by one I made my way through them. Oliver, the chef. Tad, stealth tech. Sushil, microbiology. Neil, the camp director. Rusty, a chemist with a Cromwell haircut. Paul, the meteorologist and planetary geologist. Dixie, biology. It went like that. One person, one specialty, not much conversation. They either didn't want to chit-chat, or didn't remember how to. Or something else. Zaviero, it turned out, was some kind of entomologist savant. Bugs. He couldn't spell his own name, but he was an encyclopedia on insects and arachnids, larvae and worms and their behavior—kind of like weevils and scorpions, right?

The people I talked to were all in the nearest chambers, which apparently was two layers outside of the larger chamber where I'd been pulled in, and separated tunnel from tunnel by very exacting methods of lockdown. Not a sound would penetrate into the outer world, not a flicker of light, not a scent. Survival depended on very

specific behavior, and generally the researchers didn't tend to move about any more than absolutely necessary. They'd perfected the method of sitting around without being fidgety. Rusty, the round-haired chemist, told me that they practiced yoga in order to gain calmness and resist shuffling about. Except for the immediate chance of death, this was like a weird spa or a Zen retreat. He was among the friendly ones, anxious to be around us, but hesitant to talk much.

My mother had given us forty-five minutes before dinner—slightly bizarre behavior, given the day's activities so far, but okay, maybe they had to normalize quickly in order to not go nuts here. I was determined to use every possible minute. I zeroed in on a sprightly Oriental girl, or maybe Filipino, about twenty years old, with a China-doll haircut and the figure of a boy.

"You're . . . Chantal."

"Yes—hi."

"Zoology, right?"

"And veterinary medicine." She forced a smile, then dropped it.

"I'm so sorry about your soldier friends. It's such a tragedy."

"Yeah, our captain's pretty shook up. So you're a veterinarian?"

"Will be some day. I'm here to learn."

"What kinds of things are you learning?"

"It's just amazing. We've been anatomically analyzing the Xenos and studying them physiologically. I do most of the measurements and weights."

"How do you study them without exposing yourselves to them?"

"Oh, we have specimens."

"You meant you've captured some of them? Alive?"

"Well, we get parts sometimes. You want to see our collection?"

"I'd love to." I started to follow her, then noticed that Tad, the stealth technologist who until now had pointedly ignored me, was

also following me into the passage. I paused. "Got a problem?"

Half-hidden in long stringy brown bangs, Tad's eyes worked at being expressionless. "No problem. Just going along."

I thought he might be there to protect Chantal, playing the role of a big brother or a bodyguard. What the hell, didn't bother me any. I wasn't about to touch her.

Chantal led the way through a bizarre maze of pre-fab tubular tunnels. They branched off from each other into a sophisticated anthill complex, some going upward, others down and others into curves. Sophisticated, yet still rough and spare. I was right about their following the natural cave structure. I had to be. There was no other way to set up something so complicated by digging all the tunnels themselves in a hostile area. This wasn't an engineering crew. They didn't have the expertise, the time, or the kind of environment where building would go unnoticed by the other residents, if you get my drift. The tunnels were oval-shaped, sectioned with ribs and connected by tough, flexible, and ultra-thin VyFlex, fancy new stuff just developed a couple of years ago for space and inhospitable environs. The whole tunnel, all fifty or so yards of it by the time we came to another chamber, packed in vacuum-sealed envelopes could probably fold up into about a square foot. These on-site living and work areas, impervious to weather extremes, moisture-proof, and easily rearranged, could be shipped in a single standard shipping container and still house hundreds of people. This team had probably packed their entire living complex into one duffel bag.

Didn't do much for claustrophobia, though, I'd have to say. By the time Chantal led me out of the tunnel, I was glad to be out, and glad to not have Tad pacing me from two feet behind, either. I'd had

enough bad experiences in alleys that they weren't my favorite places.

And then we came all the way out, and I wished I were back in. I snatched at my plasma pistol.

Before me was a full-sized adult Xenomorph. Arms flared, jaws open, it towered over us more than seven feet tall, its sausage-shaped skull turned sideways so the full profile showed itself. Long arms were down at its sides, slightly flared, its gracile feet spread for balance.

"Don't worry," Chantal said. "It's stuffed. I'm also the taxidermist." She smiled in a pixie-ish way. "I'm really proud of it. I've never done anything as big as this."

"Zat right . . ."

Overwhelmed by cold creeps, I slowly moved to the right, away from Tad, who paused there and stood like a castle guard. Not interested in him anymore, I circled the quite shocking presence towering in the middle of the chamber. As if the alien were the pivot at the center of an old-time vinyl music record and I were the edge, I moved around it, keeping as far to the circular wall as the limits of the chamber allowed. I wanted nothing to do with being near the monster.

Yet, there it was, free for the touching, the looking, from its raptor claws to its coiled cable-like tail. In fact, the whole creature was a construction of exterior cables and armor. Its ribcage was on the outside too, as were two huge shoulder fins which looked like they might have evolved to protect the sides of that long, long head. Its back was mounted with several snorkel-like extensions that didn't look as if they were for breathing, but hardly seemed as if they would be for anything else.

"Does it swim?" I asked.



"It could if it wanted to," Chantal said, gazing with adoration at her trophy. "There's not much fatty tissue, so it might actually have trouble staying afloat. That is, unless its native planet has heavily salinated water that helps with buoyancy."

"I don't see any eyes."

"The visual mechanisms are inside its helmet. It doesn't have eyes as we know them, but it does sense visually."

"How well does it see?"

"Compared to us? We're not sure yet," she said. "All other visually oriented beings from fish to higher predators have binocular vision. These have a kind of band that goes from where its ears would be if it were us, around the nose area and back again. At least, so far that's what we *think* they see with."

I gripped my plasma pistol as if it were a security blanket and gazed up at the monumental iron-black creature. "Well, that's . . . that's just . . . huge . . ."

The creature's enormously long skull was actually translucent on the top and I could see right through to a complex row of arched inner segments that didn't look like brain tissue, but like more skull.

Ultimately the laws of circles worked to bring me all the way around to where the creature's mouth was turned to meet me. The pointed lower jaw was dropped to show a set of piranha teeth the length of my fingers, and showing inside them was some kind of square contraption.

"Is that a . . . tongue?" I asked.

"That's not a tongue," Tad said, almost as if he were warning me. "It's a second set of jaws."

"Really . . . What do you suppose it would need a thing like that for?"

"We don't know."

Seemed to be a pattern here. Considering they'd been here a long time and doing all this studying, I'd heard more we-don't-knows than answers.

"How does it survive on this planet?" I asked.

Chantal seemed briefly confused. "Survive? What do you mean?"

I thought about Bonnie. "What do they eat? They have to consume, right, because they're energetic? The young have to gain mass in ratio to their growth somehow . . . and they use human bodies for reproduction, we were told, so if there aren't enough humans, then what do they do? That's how they spread, isn't it? With those face-hugger things—their young?"

"Those aren't actually the 'young,'" Chantal eagerly explained. She seemed happy to be able to teach. "They're the . . . more like sperm. They aren't the seed, but they carry the seed. They're receptacles for seed."

I laughed, mostly to let off the tension of being so close to . . . that.

"Are you saying they're fruit?"

She smiled. "Yes, I guess so! Once they implant the seeds, they die off. It's their only purpose."

"So they carry life," I said, "but they don't live a life."

She nodded, this time in silent thoughtfulness about what I had just said.

"So they'll use other animals," I went on, trying not to push her. "Not just humans."

"Yes, they use the indigenous population of hosts. They impregnate a creature large enough to incubate one of their young. The smallest we've ever recorded was twenty-eight pounds—"

"That's just a rumor," Tad quickly said. "It's not confirmed."

"Other animals?" I asked for clarification.

“Oh, yes!” Chantal bubbled. “This planet is loaded with life forms. Haven’t you seen them yet?”

“We’ve seen the weevilly things, but we haven’t run into anything except the, uh—” I made a crawly motion with my hand.

“That’s because the Xenos are on the move. Some of the native life has learned about them and clustered in the valley. We’ve noted a buffalo-sized animal moving in herds, and several types of homeothermic life and flightless birds, as well as a possible pre-mammal up to twenty-eight pounds—”

“We’re not sure they’re pre-mammals,” Tad corrected. “We haven’t done much analysis. We’ve spent most of our time perfecting hiding techniques. We want to do the zoological research over the next year.”

“Since you have this stuffed one,” I began, “does this mean you were able to dissect one?”

Chantal tried again to speak. “We did what we ca—”

“We can’t dissect them,” Tad cut her off again and took over the explanation. “This one died in an unusual circumstance. It was impaled on a glass spike when it fell off a cliff. Its body drained of the acid blood and its internal cavities were excavated by the blackies long afterward. We managed to clean and retrieve the exoskeleton. Chantal pieced it together with some other parts we had lying around.” His eyes flipped to Chantal and he added, “We just got lucky.”

Chantal stared back at him for longer than was necessary. “I pieced it together.”

Pretty soon she’d just be repeating whatever he said.

I wished I could talk to her alone. “Then you didn’t have much chance to really have a look at its internal organs?”

“We’d have trouble with that,” Tad said. “Their blood, once it’s exposed to the outside elements, turns acidic. There’s hardly any implement we can use to touch it that doesn’t dissolve. It’s just one of the things we haven’t figured out yet.”

“Still,” I prodded, “You’ve been here a long time. Don’t they eventually die of natural causes? Sooner or later you find road kill, don’t you?”

Chantal opened her mouth to speak, but Tad cut her off again.

“We haven’t found the Secret Xeno Burial Ground yet.”

I pretended not to notice the discomfort between them.

“Well, it’ll be in the same place as the lost hangers and safety pins.”

After several minutes I was finally able to take my eyes off the astonishing presence of the stuffed alien, and my skin crawled when I did. I still had the idea it would come back to life. I had to force myself to look around the chamber. The whole room wasn’t much taller than the alien trophy, and only about ten by ten feet, shaped in a pentagon, with five interlocked pre-fab walls. It was also a museum of alienhood. Much of the wall area was devoted to racks of file boxes, probably full of specimens of things I’d seen and things I hadn’t yet. This was a scientific archive. I recognized it because we’d had three rooms like this in our house while I was growing up. We only had six rooms, and three of them were this.

Except in our house we didn’t have parts of deadly creatures mounted on the walls. Almost as astonishing as the giant stuffed creature was the extended disembodied tail of another of its kind, cut off at a point that must’ve been very close to the body. The tail hung suspended near the low ceiling, extending all the way across one wall segment and halfway across the next. Its blunt end was mangled, but its serrated tip still intact and quite horrifying.

Mounted on other parts of the wall were three alien hands, a foot, and an impressive collection of claws. There were also four siphon tubes, the snorkel things on their backs, the back part of a head, and two long squared-off . . . I reacted with a flinch when I realized those were two sets of the inner jaws, somehow cleaved from inside the throats of two aliens.

"We don't want to examine dead ones," Tad said bluntly, determined to get me off that track, ironic considering the macabre collection. "Before our expedition here, human experience with Xenos has been limited to the way they interact with humans. On this planet, we've been able to observe how they interact with other life forms."

"Where did you get all this stuff?" I asked.

"Road kill," Tad said. Was he making a joke?

I decided to leave that one alone and go after the other angle. "Do they do something different with other life forms than they do with us?"

"No," Chantal perked up. "They have the same kind of reproductive imperative—"

"Chantal," Tad warned. "This isn't your field of expertise."

"Sorry . . ."

I glanced from one to the other. "So this is like spending years and millions of dollars to do a study to tell us that girls are different from boys. Anybody with kids can tell you that." Moving as far away as the chamber allowed from the alien trophy, I tried to steer the conversation my way. "Well, this is all damned impressive, I have to say . . . Chantal, maybe you know this. I was going to ask my mother, but I forgot. What happened to the people in the huts back at that camp? Why were they inside there? We couldn't figure out whether they were hiding and just got caught by the face things, or,

y'know, what they would've been doing inside with the door panels just open a few inches. Were they in there for protection? Or maybe they were hiding from those things. I mean, who wouldn't hide? First they scare you to death, then they finish the job."

I gestured up at the enormous stuffed adult alien and implied I was making some kind of joke, to see if there were any takers.

Chantal blinked, but that was all the body language Tad's glower allowed her. "We . . . we . . ."

"She doesn't know," Tad said. "It's not her area."

I dropped the routine and turned to face him. "Is it yours?"

Tad bristled. "Jocasta warned us about you. She said you don't understand scientific research at all and that we shouldn't even address the issue with you."

"Yeah? What 'issues' would those be?"

I moved closer to him. Intimidation is an art form.

"In about two hours," I said slowly, "I've seen some pretty horrible deaths, as deaths go. This planet is a slaughter field. And no matter how many heads I count, the number comes up short. That's *my* kind of scientific research. I admit it's simple, but in it the questions can be almost as important as the answers. You're the stealth specialist, aren't you?"

"I sure am."

"You'll have to give me a tour of the technology you use to hide. I'd really like to see that. I guess the only way not to be their target is if they don't know you're here."

He paused for a spell, measuring me, measuring Chantal and the intrusion on their private territory that I represented.

"I don't think you'll be around long enough for tours," he said.

\* \* \*

Probably a big mistake, but I cut to the chase and cornered my sister next.

I listened around, then followed her voice when I heard it, and tracked her through one of the shorter corridors to a cramped chamber where she was giving instructions to Neil. Odd, because I thought Neil was the camp director and Gracie would be taking orders, not giving them. Then, being a Malvaux carried some weight here for her too.

My sister was an odd combination of a follower and a leader. She was a prime follower *of* a leader, willing to keep everybody around her in line behind the leader. She had the spark of science in her mind and her talents, but had always been overshadowed by our mother, always assumed to have gotten the degree or the job or whatever because she was Jocasta Malvaux's daughter. All her life, and all mine, we had been known not as Rory and Graciella Malvaux, but as "Jocasta Malvaux's son" or "Jocasta Malvaux's daughter." We each coped in our own way, Gracie by embracing the role, and I by rejecting it.

I didn't fit into my mother's world of research, awards, expeditions, more awards, discoveries, and even more awards. In fact, I'd always found it kind of distasteful. Gracie always said it was because I was never the one getting the awards and I was bitter. On some level she was probably right. But on my own level, I'd always found the spectacle gauche and pretentious, especially the way our mother enjoyed the glow of the spotlight. I always had the idea she was making history so she could get another fix of that glow.

Maybe I was wrong. There certainly wasn't much of a glow way out here in the hindquarters of space. And she'd have to go a long way back to get it.

"Gracie," I began. "Can I have a word?"

She glowered at me, then nodded to Neil to leave us alone. He seemed glad to do it, and disappeared down a corridor I hadn't even seen, a short one that went off upward and that he actually had to climb to use.

When the scrapings of Neil's escape faded away and I thought we were probably alone—although I had no idea what kind of surveillance they used or how paranoid my mother was—I tried to modify my tone to be non-confrontational, although I did cut to the subject without any frills.

"You've lost weight," I mentioned.

"It's hard to stay fat on rations."

"Or is it from running?"

"We don't run. We hide."

"Yeah, that's what I hear. What are those things, Gracie? What kind of environment creates beasts like that?"

"A complex one, that's what. So what? You don't care."

"We don't know where they come from, do we?"

"No."

"Clark says they hitchhike around from place to place. Apparently our own space ships have given them a couple of free rides."

"I don't know, Rory. They're here. That's all that counts."

I leaned against a thick case of processed, flash-dried foodstuffs. "Not very curious, for a scientist. Come on, tell me something."

She poured herself a tin cup full of iced coffee—iced, so there was no aroma—and tapped artificial sweetener into it. "They're somewhere between instinct and intellect."

"Where?" I asked. "Like dogs or like dolphins?"

"We don't know where they are on the line. We know they communicate, and we know they learn. And we know they forget."



After five months of perfect hiding, they finally forgot about us and stopped looking. They went back to their genetic imperatives. But it took five months. That's a lot longer than any animal on Earth. They're smart."

"And this genetic imperative is to spread out? And continue sucking up the life forms on this planet?"

"The planet will adjust."

"How many people have you lost?"

The question set her even more on edge than she was, but she tried to control her answer. "We lost some right away, before we learned to cope."

"You mean, when you found out that camp of huts wasn't going to protect you from those monsters?"

Her green eyes flashed at me the way they had when we were children and she felt slighted by being the younger child. "Yes, then, all right? Things don't always go right. This is a wilderness compound. We had a few accidents and then we got control. Just like you and the people you brought here today. You should all have known better than to come into an unstable environment without specialists."

"Maybe," I allowed. I didn't want to waste time arguing the wrong points. "Where'd you find these people?"

"They applied," she said. "You know that."

"So did thousands of others." I folded my arms and fought off a shiver. They kept it too cool in here. Probably as a precaution, to avoid putting off heat signatures. "I mean, people like Yuki and Ethan and Zaviero. Do you really think they had a perception of the brutality of this environment?"

"I wasn't in the screening process. You're talking to the wrong person."

"I know. I should be talking to M'am, but I don't think I could get an honest assessment out of her."

"Actually, we don't have to talk to you at all. It's not your business to 'assess' us or our expedition."

"I'm the only one who can," I stated bluntly. "Most people get goggled-eyed around M'am. She casts some kind of superstar spell on them. I'm just wondering whether she didn't take advantage of that to surround herself with people she could control. As scientists go, they're all pretty young. Nobody old enough that M'am couldn't be his mother. It's how she keeps authority, isn't it? She also has twenty years more experience than anybody here."

"That's good, isn't it?" she snapped.

"Unless you're the inexperienced one."

She spoke through set teeth. "These are qualified professional scientists and interns with specialties of use to this mission. They willingly came. They knew what they were getting into."

I moved closer to her, and leaned in such a way that she couldn't avoid looking directly at me. "Did you?"

She took a gulp of her iced coffee and made a throaty sound of disgust. When she swallowed, taking her time to do it, she shook her head in frustration. "Nobody wants you here."

"Maybe, but that's not my problem."

"What is your problem, Rory? Because, damn . . ."

"Maybe that I've only counted thirteen people here," I pointed out. "M'am says you've lost nine. Where are the other thirty people, Gracie?"

"They're out," she said instantly. "On remote expeditions."

"When's the last time you heard from them?"

"I don't know . . . few weeks."

"You don't know?"

Gracie started moving around the little room, picking up bundles of the neon-blue suit I'd seen some of the researchers wearing. If I counted right, there were at least enough for everybody. She gathered them into a bundle in her arms, which got bigger with each suit she rolled into it. "Why should I know? It's not my job. We'd go crazy if we tried to watch over each other too much."

"I don't buy it. This is a dangerous environment where people live intimate lives. They get to know everything about each other and every bit of information is absorbed voraciously."

"When did you become a psychologist?" She snatched up another blue suit from a hook on the side of a shelf unit.

"You're lying and I want to know the truth," I said. "Where, precisely, are the other thirty people?"

She pushed me away and made room for herself to slip toward the tunnel.

"Get away from us, Rory. Go away. Go home. Go—get fried or get laid or dig a hole or live your own life, but get off our backs." She dumped the pile of blue suits into a sterilizer unit and cranked the controls to turn on the microwaves that would do the sterilizing. "It's time for dinner. And you'd better be respectful. We don't discuss business at dinner."

\* \* \*

"Dinner" was happening, near as I could figure, around what would normally be lunch for the rest of the universe. I didn't question it. I had other questions, and maybe they called it this because it was the main meal of the day and they wanted to normalize at least one parcel of each day. Why they couldn't do it in the evening, I had no guesses.

In the twenty-foot-wide chamber which was apparently the central clearinghouse, the same chamber where I'd been pulled into the blind, they had set up a makeshift table made up of wall components on a trestle of long, narrow containers. They'd moved some shelves, making the chamber more like twenty by twenty-five, to make room for the extra people, and the table just got longer the more containers and components used. There were containers all over the place, each with markings and scratches and handles. Used for toting and storage, they were also used for furniture.

Another interesting feature—the projector curtain which had saved my life and which separated us flimsily from the dangerous outside world, was no longer transparent. While I had been able to see through it to the landscape before, it was now on some kind of “rest” mode, looking pretty much like a big metallic bathroom shower curtain with little squared cells in the fabric. Those must be the projectors. They could project an image on the outside, and project back into this area whatever was on the outside. Very fancy, as one-way mirrors go. Darkened as it was now, it created a neo-designer sensation to the basement-like chamber and made things feel more intimate, probably in deference to “dinner.”

The campers had lit a line of electrical votives along the center of the table, simulating candlelight. Real candles would've created a scent. They'd managed to create a little living environment here despite strict restrictions on behavior, sound, and function. I looked at the fabric-like wall of special sheeting that masked the hideaway. It looked almost like a clear curtain from this side, except for a faint bluish tint, but I knew it wasn't see-through at all. We could look out, but no one could look in. I found it disconcerting to be standing here in front of what appeared to be a big open garage door, and I

had to discipline myself to the idea that I wasn't visible from out there.

Nope . . . couldn't relax yet. The curtain had no lock-down, but just hung there, slightly weighted at the bottom. Anything could walk through—if it knew where to walk.

I stayed away from the long table as the campers went about their routine of setting up dinner. They didn't speak, except to point out what was needed, and set out sealable storage containers of various types of—I guess it was food. From here, most of the food appeared processed, dried, or distilled to an essence. Other than the colors—green, tan, reddish—I couldn't identify the food. They were all native edibles, to make sure that all bodily discharges didn't smell different from the environment. These things were no surprise. My mother had always embraced survivalism and guerrilla tactics, one of which was to eat only indigenous food, so body odor and discharges all smelled natural to an area. Soldiers had long practiced the trick to mask their presence. Of course, that meant the whole crew of the *Vinza* and the Marines and me smelled all wrong. I probably should've thought of this and told Clark well ahead of time. But then, we hadn't expected to take up residence.

Still, I should've warned him. I'd been too casual, too much of an outsider. I should've embraced the mission and done everything in my power to warn him, to inform him, make him understand what he was really dealing with.

Should I speak up now? Be seen whispering to him in a corner? Or would that do more harm than good? We were already getting suspicious looks and touchy glances and cold shoulders.

"Hi." Neil, the camp "director," and I would've like to know what kind of directing he did, came around a stack of drum containers. "Can I show you around?"

Okay, maybe I'm too suspicious, but I wondered if he'd been sent by my mother to keep his eye on us. Would he show us everything or was there a tacit list of things he was *allowed* to show us?

Yeah, yeah, paranoid. Maybe. I'd lived with Jocasta Malvaux a lot longer than any of these folks had.

"Sure," Clark took up the offer. "We're just standing around."

"What I'd like to know," I asked, "is how you knew where we were when you gave us directions to come down the flume."

"Oh, that's easy." Neil seemed relieved by the question. I couldn't interpret that. Not yet, anyway. "The displays are right over here."

He led us through a maze of stacked containers, stacked higher than I was tall. Inside a quartered-off cubby which could be seen from the dinner area but not from the projector curtain, was a seating area of three inflatable chairs arranged around a shimmering scaffold of viewing monitors. I counted twenty-six monitors, each the size of a lady's evening bag, each showing a different location on the landscape out there. The quality of the pictures wasn't very good, often tending to flicker or become grainy. The equipment might not be holding up to the environment, but that was just a guess. One screen showed the nose section of the *Vinza* where she sat in her parking place. Another showed one of her stabilizer wings and part of her tail section. A third showed the camp huts where we'd found the dead people. So they'd been able to see us all along. A shiver ran across my shoulders, knowing that they had seen us and not spoken up. Rather than make trouble about it now, I kept my mouth shut. A glance from Clark made me wonder if he wasn't thinking the same thing.

Other screens showed various locations I didn't recognize, pathways, entrances to caves, views from inside caves out onto the red land, views from halfway up pillars that looked down upon

tracts of land. Some showed different kinds of terrain than I'd seen so far—more lush areas with brushy yellow grasses, high red and blue ferns, and stick structures that looked like trees in winter, except they were white, not brown. There was an unrestricted quality to these places, like children's drawings of places they'd never seen.

"How are you getting these pictures?"

"We've been gradually installing video equipment throughout the terrain, one or two at a time. They're curious, but after a while they start to ignore the new installations."

I made a sound of admiration. "Must be dangerous to secure cameras in some of those places."

"Oh, it's dangerous. We lost six people just setting up the cameras."

"Six, huh . . ."

I might've pursued that, but something else caught my eye and stiffened my limbs. On four or five of the monitors, there were adult aliens moving along through a slight mist rising to their shoulders. They moved mostly in shadow, and in single file. Some rolled, some walked.

"Wow, look at 'em," Clark murmured.

"How close are they?" I asked

Neil sighed. "They're still in the vicinity, but moving way. That's the tribe that walked past you while you were under the slab. It's a good thing you hit the ground when you did. If they'd seen you, I bet they'd have found our opening here. Usually they don't pass this close."

"Are they migrating or what?" Clark asked. "Hunting?"

"We're not sure why they're moving around so much. Usually they don't move much during the day. Lately they've been . . . hey

... who's that?"

We followed his gaze to the upper right corner of screens. Two screens in the top corner showed movement. Humans . . . three of them, dressed in standard gear except for the single Marine. It was Edney.

With her was Pocket, the bosun, loaded down with a medical backpack, and leading the way was the last person in the universe that I had wanted to come out of that ship again.

"Bonnie!"

While we stood there frozen in shock that they had dared to leave the ship again and were outside the protective area, our horrors were confirmed as we saw, as we hid here in our protective nest, a single face-hugger crawl up around the trunk of a pillar. After it, came two more. Then two more. The spider-legged fingers moved one at a time, a sight somehow even more ghastly than when they moved quickly.

I grabbed Clark by the sleeve. "They're being stalked!"



## 6

“Get out of my way!”

I shoved Neil aside, drew my plasma pistol, and veered through the stacked containers toward the projector curtain. Through it I could just see Bonnie step into the vicinity some thirty feet out from the entrance, on the other side of the slab with its low-lying hiding place that had saved my life.

“Stop!” Neil called, but he couldn’t hold Clark and I was already dodging for the projector screen.

“I see ‘em, I see ‘em!” Tad came shooting through the east tunnel and slammed right into me. His neon-blue suit made him look like a cartoon superhero. With strong purpose he knocked me back. “Stay here!

“T’hell with you!” I found my feet and followed him out the projector curtain.

Behind me I heard Clark battle with Zaviero and Neil, who were managing to stop him from following. I heard him shout my name—or part of it—before someone muffled his mouth.

As I passed through the stealth curtain, there was somebody at my side—young Carmichael, the baby Marine, with his big ballistic

weapon.

There must be twenty things wrong with what I was doing, but I didn't take the time to analyze. I plowed out into the black drifty skulch and ran up the grade behind Tad. Carmichael was so close to me that my heels kicked the cereal-like skulch up into his face. He held his weapon in one hand and used the other hand to claw his way up the flume and keep up with me. I wanted to shout a warning—should I dare? Would noise turn a stalking into an attack?

During those moments between watching the monitor and gaining the crest of the flume, I almost had a coronary with panic. I couldn't see whether Bonnie and Pocket and the brave but wounded Edney had been hit yet and the suspense practically pulled my skin off. All I could see in my mind was MacCormac as he blew poor Axell's head off, along with the face-hugger that had clamped onto him. The idea that Bonnie—that Pocket—

I ran harder, afraid that just our frantic scramble was trumpet enough to set off an attack. In my periphery I saw Tad pull a blue neon hood over his head, then all the way down over his face until he looked like a big blue posable artist's mannequin. That's when we heard the *FOOM-crack* of Edney's weapon being fired over the hill. It had started.

I ran so hard that he and I crested the hill together despite his head start, with Carmichael, in the flower of almost teenaged strength, right behind us.

Only ten feet from us, Bonnie and Pocket were huddled against the trunk of a tree-sized pillar, while Edney fired away, round after round, tightly firing but each ballistic shot carefully and instantly considered. Four face-huggers lay writhing on the ground, two of them blown in half, while maybe a dozen others had appeared and seemed to know their cover was blown and were trying to rush the

victims. Carmichael skidded to Edney's side and together they began volleying the energy beam.

I fired my plasma gun, adding my short, popping blasts to theirs. I almost missed every other time because the face-huggers were covering the distance now by jumping from pillar to pillar. Edney and Carmichael shifted back to ballistics and blasted away at the crawlers who got too close.

Too close! Hell, they were all too close!

"Run!" Tad bellowed as he tore right toward them.

Because he was now in our line of fire, the three of us shooting had to pause. "Get down!" I ordered to him, but he kept running right for them, pushing buttons on some kind of wristband on a pair of gauntlets he'd pulled on somehow between the blind and here. Head to toe, his blue suit began to glow like the sign on a cheap motel. Sparks flew from the suit. Each spark let off a second spark just as it hit its fizzle-point. Tad snapped, crackled, and popped his way right into the center of the hugger phalanx. Just as he reached them, he tossed a grenade of some kind over his shoulder, which landed near us and exploded into a huge—and I mean *huge*—ball of white stenchy smoke.

There was a squeal, several squeals, which to my untrained ear sounded a whole lot more like anger than surprise. I didn't want to wait around to see how angry those things could get.

"Retreat!" Edney called.

Carmichael grabbed Bonnie and I grabbed Pocket.

Bonnie tried to pull away. "The ship! It's that way—"

"No ship! Come on!"

Pocket gulped, "Where—"

"Don't argue!" I took hold of his ponytail and cranked his head in the direction I wanted him to go, then put a knee in his butt to

encourage him along.

I cast a quick look behind us at the slowly dissipating cloud of stink and saw the huggers turn and flock after Tad, who disappeared down a gulley. The face-huggers were after him now.

Should I help? I shoved Pocket after Carmichael, Edney, and Bonnie, and stumbled for a moment at the edge of the stink cloud. Where had Tad gone? They were all after him—those god-awful things.

“Rory, let’s go, man!” Pocket called as Carmichael hooked his arm and pulled him away.

“Right . . .” Reluctantly I turned and ran back toward the blind.

\* \* \*

“Bonnie! What the devil in a bowl of spice are you doing here!”

Clark’s voice boomed in the otherwise quiet hideout.

The blind felt cold now compared to the outside, and it seemed dark to my stinging eyes. I stumbled in after Carmichael, to find Clark already confronting Bonnie.

Pocket collapsed onto a box and sat there sucking air mechanically, while Bonnie, pasty pale with fear, blinked up at Clark. Neil and Zaviero made sure the projector veil was closed behind us.

“Tad’s still out there!” I gasped.

“He’ll be okay,” Neil said. “He’s cloaked.”

“What ‘cloaked’? He was running!”

“It’s a distracting technique. Here, look.”

He led us like a gaggle of baby ducks to the wall of screens and pointed at a screen in the middle, which showed Tad in his totally blue glowing suit, now standing perfectly still in a grotto. He stood in the open, and around him a dozen huggers clawed and scratched

at the ground, hunting and snooping, but finding nothing. Or at least, seeing nothing. Did they have eyes? Sensing nothing?

"Can they see?" Clark asked.

"Somehow, they do," Neil said. "It's more than just sensing, because they've been known to jump at people from behind glass, which means they see."

"Why aren't they seeing him?"

"It's the suit."

"But he's standing right there," Clark pointed out.

"Somehow they can't see past the blue glow. We tested a whole bunch of spectral combinations. There are two they can't see. As long as he stands perfectly still and the projectors on the suit don't flicker, they'll lose interest."

Bonnie shivered and hugged her medical pack. "I can't believe he's standing so still!"

"It takes practice," Zaviero said from way up there at the top of his body. "Tad's talented."

I fought to calm my aching lungs. "What were the sparks?"

"Those, they can see," Neil said. "The sparking creates a movement, and they don't like the stink bomb, so sometimes we can get them to run in a particular direction."

"Sometimes?"

Neil wobbled his head. "Yes . . . most of the time. Sometimes."

"Okay, okay," Clark began, and turned to Bonnie and Pocket. "Okay, I'm calm. Now, what are you doing here and why did you leave the ship against orders?"

Pocket glanced at Bonnie, then back to Clark. "What do you mean, what are we doing here?"

"Should I say it in Spanish?"

"We got your message to come out," Bonnie said. "A distress call."

"What distress call? We didn't send any."

Bonnie blinked and faltered. "Y—yes, you did. Somebody did . . . Theo picked it up in the scrambler. When we unscrambled it, we got a signal of distress with flash for rescue."

Clark shifted his weight and hung his hands on his hips. "We didn't send anything."

Pocket, Bonnie, and Edney were mystified.

"We're not stupid," Pocket said. "We got a signal."

"By voice?"

"Yeah, but garbled. We couldn't tell whose voice it was."

"Male or female?" I asked.

Pocket rubbed the back of his neck. "Huh?"

"I'm gonna get to the bottom of that," Clark huffed angrily. He started to go toward the table, to ask around, but I pulled him back with a move so sharp that it drew attention. I waited a second, until that attention faded back.

"Don't say anything about it," I instructed.

He frowned. "Why in hell not?"

"Just don't. Something's going on here and I'd like the chance to figure out what it is."

"Aw, there's just some screw up and I'm gonna kill it."

"Does it hurt to shut up for a while?"

He paused, partly to calm down and partly to consider the fact that I was asking him to do something completely illogical. He trusted me and in that moment I felt gratified. "I don't know," he said. "Does it?"

"Somebody's playing with us," I warned.

"Come on, Rory, you're looking for trouble. There's some screw up or a malfunction. I need to make sure it doesn't happen again."

Baldly sarcastic, I chided, "I think we've been in some trouble so far, Clark."

"Those were just terrible accidents. Don't make more of it than it is."

"Just keep quiet. I want to hear what M'am volunteers about it, if anything. Later you can tell me I was wrong. Deal?"

He drilled me with a glare, during which I think he was remembering that I'd been right about the researchers' still being here and alive. He fought to control his frustration. "Mmm . . . well, deal, for now."

He shook his head and wandered away to watch Tad stand absolutely still on the bank of screens. There were now only two huggers lurching around Tad's glowing blue suit. The others had moved on their way, possibly still looking for us.

"You come with me," he said to Pocket. They went around the other side of the stacked containers for some kind of captain-to-crew lecture.

Corporal Edney turned to Carmichael. "Let's find the colonel and make a report."

"Yes, ma'am," the kid said, and followed her away. Neil stayed to monitor Tad's statue imitation. Zaviero lost interest and wandered somewhere.

I turned to Bonnie, who looked confused and ashamed. "That was pretty brave," I told her. "Brave, and nuts."

"This whole thing is nuts," she said with a sigh. "I kept thinking of what might happen to you and the captain out here, how you turned right around after we were attacked and you came right back out here . . . what would I think of myself if I didn't do my part? I couldn't go back to Earth and report to PlanCom that I hadn't even

tried to participate. When the distress call came in, I guess I . . . thought . . . providence had kicked in."

"Like I said. Pretty brave."

Embarrassed by the compliment, she looked kind of cute and sweet there, with her blond dirty hair all wild and her blue eyes rolling at her own risky behavior.

There was a commotion near the table, and we discovered that my mother and several of her team had come into the chamber with MacCormac and the Marines, and everyone was clamoring about the episode we'd just barely survived—again.

"Why did you rush out?" M'am demanded as soon as she saw me. When she spoke, everybody else fell silent.

I shrugged. "They were in trouble."

"We'll handle the trouble from now on. You did it again— attracting attention to the wrong area. Now Tad's having to stand-pet out there to distract them."

"Stand-pet?"

"Petrified," she clarified. "It's a skill. You don't have it."

"Sorry," I said, just to get it over with fast.

"Sure you are," my sister commented. I hadn't even seen her come in.

Our mother made a mighty show of controlling herself. "You must let us handle these things. This place is like a hospital. Things are done in exacting ways for good reason. First and foremost, you may not leave the blind without escort."

"Tad was with us," I wryly noted. Okay, so I was just being snotty.

"For the good of us all," she said firmly, "while you live in our house, you follow our rules. All of you." She turned to make eye contact with Clark, Pocket, and the Marines. "Is that clear?"



The Marines looked at MacCormac to speak for them.

After a moment, he did. "We'll make every effort to comply, ma'am."

M'am looked at Clark.

He nodded. "Okay, my crew will comply. But I need to contact the ship to confirm that they are not to exit under any conditions."

"Graciella will help you do that without causing incorrect signals. Everyone, please clean your hands for dinner, using the dry cleaner which Neil will give to you."

She motioned the gathering toward Neil, who waved everybody to the far end of the dinner table.

Then she turned to me and Bonnie. "Rory, will you introduce us, please?"

Bonnie was busy beaming and trying to mash down her insane hair.

"Oh, sure," I said. "Bonnie Bardolf, this is my mother, Jocasta Malvaux."

"Miss Bardolf. Pleasure to meet you."

"Oh—me too!" Bonnie bubbled. "I'm *such* an admirer . . . I've read your books and watched your videos and I was hooked when you addressed Congress to push the Alien Species Act through!"

"Thank you most sincerely," my mother said milkily. "You're very sweet and devoted, I can tell. A medical specialist?"

"Yes, I'm a resident physician. Not quite there yet!"

"I'm sure you'll be marvelous. What will you do after your residency?"

"I'm indentured to PlanCom for fifteen years."

"Ah. Let me know if you ever want to get out of it. I have some influence."

For the first time, a shadow of something less than hero-worship crossed Bonnie's face. "Oh . . . thanks, but I'm very comfortable right now. PlanCom's been very good for me."

"Of course." My mother's gentle smile was as practiced as a professional model's. "You'll join us for our meal. You can sit next to me."

Bonnie fell for it. She bounced on her toes with excitement at meeting her idol. M'am took her by the arm and escorted her to the table, around which the mismatched gaggle of humans was beginning to form. They sat on little uneven benches made of boards and more crates.

Before we joined them, Clark leaned toward me and whispered, "Do you call her 'Ma'am' all the time?"

I nodded. "I was almost eleven before I figured out it isn't exactly the same as 'Mom.'"

He sighed. "She seems real sweet, Rory. You sure you're not just imagining this because you don't like her?"

"Maybe you better ask *why* I don't like her before you write me off."

He lowered his voice even more, which only gave me the idea that there wasn't surveillance inside as well as outside. Clark didn't suspect that—but I started to.

"You may not realize it," he said, "but you have control over something huge and important for all mankind. What you say goes, as far as releasing the PPs. Aren't you kind of intimidated? I know I am."

"It doesn't intimidate me all that much," I told him. "Unless I think about it or some jerk reminds me."

We joined the others and found places to sit. The so-called food sat in serving containers put on the table by Oliver, the "chef." There

were bowls of grains, several kinds of dried fruit, dried, rolled tortilla things stuffed with something green, and spiky vegetables, also dried. I assumed the drying was to eliminate the aroma of fresh growth.

Nobody took anything. I got the idea it was the same as when Gracie and I were children—nobody touched the food till the queen was ready.

M'am took her seat at the far end of the table, in what was obviously the place of central attention and honor. "Attention, team, my dear friends, and children. Captain Sparren and my son Rory, and their Marine friends will be leaving soon and launching their ship off the planet. They know they've compromised months of work by coming here and we know it was an honest mistake. They've promised to leave as soon as the area can be cleared and we can deliver them back to their ship. We are sad to note the deaths of some people today who came to our planet without knowing how to live safely here, and we are crushed to lose them for no good reason. We would like to note their courage today and to mourn their loss. They did not come here to die, but to rescue us. They didn't know we don't need rescue. And to our new friends, Miss Bonnie and Mr. Pocket, and Marine Edney, we would like to note your courage as well for answering the distress call."

"What do you know about that call?" I asked, dashing her dramatic monologue. I didn't want to let it go by, and I didn't think Clark would ask.

My mother's eyes focused firmly on me and she paused long enough to make a dramatic effect. "The only possibility is that your Marine tried to send one before he passed away during his battle with the primal stage."

She made it sound romantic, as if Brand had “passed away” in his sleep during some moral quest.

It was a better answer than I expected. I suppose it was the best answer. Some of my suspicions began to calm down. I was probably more on edge about her than I needed to be.

When I didn’t forward any arguments to her logic, my mother continued addressing the entire table. “Whatever things are now, they are. When we decide, we will deliver you back to your ship and you may be on your way. We’ll enjoy our meal, and then I will take my son and Captain Sparren on a tour of our most beautiful area. It will be relatively safe by then.”

Before we had a chance to mull over the term “relatively,” I poked Clark and said, “Scuse me.”

He looked as if he’d eaten a bad olive. “Yeah?”

“Tell them, please.”

His head wagged a little from side to side, then huffed out a breath and seemed to accept that there was no point in continuing the misconception. “Yeah,” he uttered unhappily. “I’m sorry, but . . . Mrs. Malvaux, I’m afraid you got the wrong idea here.”

My mother sniffed through a napkin. “Pardon?”

I knew that inflection. The one that pretended she didn’t know exactly what he was going to say when really she did. I’d heard it before. Kids tune in to these kinds of things with their parents, then later nobody believes them.

Clark pulled a computer slide out of his pocket. He held it between his thumb and forefinger to show the official seal. “This planet has been declared a dying planet with a fatal disease. The aliens are classified BioHazard One, a plague that will destroy the planet’s biosystem by wrecking the food chain. They’ll consume every animal over twenty pounds and the food chain will collapse.”

My mother counted off a dramatic pause before speaking. "How do you dare to say this? Where do you get such information?"

"From you," I spoke up. "It's all your own research, deep-spaced back to Earth for analysis."

"You're using our own reports against us?"

"Not *against* you, Mrs. Malvaux," Clark said. "For your own good. For the good of this planet."

Accustomed to arguing her point before committees, companies, boards of directors, and Congress, she kept her cool but spoke with a very firm and decisive method. "This is not "our good" at all. We will not be leaving our work behind before we barely get started."

Clark avoided the eyes of everybody else on the team and just tried to face down my mother. "Our ship is loaded with robotic hunter-killers filled with coded poison to neutralize these aliens. We call them 'PPs'. Poison-packers. We have orders to sterilize the planet of all non-native DNA."

"But *we* have non-native DNA!" Gracie argued.

He looked at her. "It's not aimed at you. Everybody in this outpost will have to be evacuated back to Earth until the poison-packers have completely scoured the planet, which we figure might take a year. It's aimed at the alien species you're here to study."

"But we're not finished!" my sister continued. "It took us half this time to set up this outpost! We just mounted the last two cameras yesterday! We've barely begun the real observation!"

"Nothing will happen to the outpost," Clark explained, faltering some. "It'll still be here and usable after the planet is cleansed and we have a good planet for colonization, right in a spacelace. You can return here in a year and take over right where you left off—"

Gracie slapped her hand flat on the table. "After you've killed off the subjects of our research!"

"You can't do it," our mother said. "No, you can't." She remained calm, but she was starting to twitch around the eyes, brows, and lips, and her hands were pressed knuckle-down onto the table. "These actions are in violation of the Alien Species Act."

Clark drew courage from a little glance at me, and went on with his obviously rehearsed statement. "This planet's been declared an exception to the ASA. The aliens are regarded as more dangerous to other innocent forms of native life populating this planet. We have your reports of the ecosystem's population of—"

"There is much native life here, yes! The Xenos are part of that life! They show intelligence enough that the ASA applies!"

"There's no point to arguing points," I said, as quietly as possible and still firm. "This planet has to be evacuated. The aliens need to be wiped out before they wipe out everything else."

"You have no right to destroy them on a planetary scale!" my mother said angrily. "You want to exterminate a healthy species for profit!"

We'd hit a nerve.

Knowing it would make her crazy, maybe break down her control, I leaned an elbow on the table and casually said, "Everybody does everything for profit, M'am. You courted billions so you could fund your expedition."

"That's not profit!" Gracie exploded. "This isn't just some decadent vacation!"

"Oh, like hell it isn't. You took somebody else's money and spent it the way you wanted it spent. What do you think 'profiting' is? You can profit for your purposes, but somebody else who spends the money on his own family is 'decadent.' What makes your choices more moral than anybody else's?"

"We don't spend our money on eccentricities!"

"Then what are you doing here?"

"Advancing science!"

"What've you learned? How they breed? How they kill? We already know that."

"I hate you."

"They have a right to be here," our mother said, breaking into our argument as she had so many times in our lives.

"No more than we do," Clark took over again. "They're as alien to this planet as humans. They'll destroy it. We won't. If you want to cherish the planet, this is the way."

"I will defend this helpless species, Captain."

"They're a disease, Mother," I said. "According to your own reports, they sweep through an area, consuming or implanting every species that accommodates them, then they move on to the next group. If you do the math, this planet won't have any of its native species left after another year of this invasion."

Gracie turned another shade of red. "That's a lie!"

"No, it's not. I read your reports. They're consuming their way through every native species big enough to host their larvae. A whole planet's health trumps one invading species."

Our mother pressed her arms straight and leaned on the table. "I refuse to allow you to use my own data against me to your evil purpose."

Sweating visibly now, Clark stood his ground. "'Fraid you have no choice. Your research hasn't given us any reason to be hopeful that this species would be, like you say, subordinated in time to save the planet's food chain. The Alien Species Act makes an exception when 'kill or be killed' is the rule."

"You're lying," she said with a twisted smile. "This is a lie. You're simply lying. There's no such clause in the Alien Species Act."

Clark shrugged in a kind of apology that wasn't really one. "I'm sorry to tell you the amendment was added after you left on this mission. A lot of people were nervous that it was so inflexible, given what we know about the, uh, Xenomorphics."

"This planet will *adapt*. It is adapting. I'll be able to prove it. I *will* prove it."

"Can you prove it now?" I dared. "This species is like smallpox. It's a kill-or-be-killed species. There's no living with them, there's no way to reason with them, and they don't respect other species' territory. I've heard you talk about things like this before, M'am. I learned this from you. This planet has a death sentence on it. You're enamored of a disease and you actually want the disease to win. Ask your . . . your virologist here how a virus works."

Diego, the virologist, looked as if he'd been fingered in a line-up. He seemed terrified that M'am would actually ask him something. That was the moment when I noticed that nobody beside M'am and Gracie were speaking up. These people were either worshipful, or they were just plain cowed.

"Ask Bonnie here," I added, gesturing at my uncomfortable shipmate. "She's a doctor. If a bear breaks into your house, you can kill the bear."

Bonnie seemed very uneasy at being asked to challenge her idol's work, but when you've got a weapon, you need to use it. I needed some leverage right now.

My mother's arms quivered with effort. She drew a few long breaths to steady herself. "This is not 'our' house. They have a right to be here. They are beautiful and intelligent. We will not be leaving. So you might as well turn around and go away from here."

The cold food somehow seemed even colder. Nobody had taken a single bite.



"Tell her, Clark," I said through my teeth.

He cast me a desperate gaze.

"Clark," I insisted, "tell her."

Under the prickling glares of the entire research team, whose dreams he was about to trample, he found himself compelled by responsibility and the pressures of his title.

He pulled a small leather pouch from his vest pocket and opened it, showing a legal envelope, stamped with a seal, and the corresponding computer disk with the identical information.

"I have a court order."

The whole group of researchers gawked, gasped, and looked at each other in astonishment. Had my mother finally been subdued? They couldn't imagine it.

"Why do you come here with a court order?" my mother demanded.

"Because I told him to," I admitted. "I knew you'd resist."

A moment of uneasy silence twisted the recycled air.

"This is human arrogance at work," my mother proclaimed. "Mankind has gone through changing moralities. Slavery. Dictators. Kings. We have rejected them. This is the age of cutting edge decisions. This is the age when we stop looking at other species as if they have no rights."

She drew another breath to continue her soliloquy, but I stopped her before she got rolling and everybody ended up in tears to her favor.

"Rights are something specific," I said. "Rights are given to human beings through the Constitution. Animals don't have rights, or we lose the definition of the word."

"Humans are just animals," Gracie challenged. "The Xenos are intelligent. They communicate. They figure things out. They'll be the

dominant species. The same thing has happened all through history. Species move in and out—”

“And we’re going to help this one move out. This planet is in the process of being overrun by these things.”

“It’s a dying planet,” Clark attempted. “They’ll destroy everything.”

If my mother had ever loved me for an instant, that instant was eradicated right here and now as she glared at us. “This planet is adapting. It’s about to strike back and battle the Xenomorphs to a level of integration. Nature is bigger than any species. It will subordinate them. The environment is changing and the planet belongs to the species that are here.”

“Humans are here,” Clark pointed out. I gave him a lot of credit for speaking up that way. He really must believe all that stuff he told me on the ship.

My mother somehow seemed to get taller. I wished we could bottle that trick.

She grew strangely calm in a projection of having regained control. I wondered if she hadn’t “lost her temper” on purpose, to demonstrate her passion, and now would re-establish her authority through purposeful dignity. She’s actually taken seminars on how to control situations, so I didn’t think I was imagining this.

Very calmly, she began again. “This decision is premature. Even if we could have evacuated, now you have ensured we never can. We must stay to protect this species. They are beautiful and vibrant. They learn. They change. You can’t get back to your ship without us, and we will not take you until we are ready to do it under our conditions. We will not go voluntarily. Will you and your soldiers attempt to drag us through this land? With all the noise and commotion, you might get forty feet. We came an amazing distance

to do the research of a thousand lifetimes, and now we will stay to protect them from you and your small universal view. As long as we remain here, you cannot release your genocidal machines.”

She stepped away from the table and had to move behind those of us sitting on the outer bench. As she passed behind me, I felt the knife of her mind sink into my spine.

She paused, and looked down at me. “I’m certain you have told him that. Being the law.”

Coming around to the other end of the table, making it clear she had no intention now of sitting down to dinner with us—dinner was probably over before it had even started—she addressed the uneasy group once again.

“However, in fairness,” she went on, “there’s only this one opportunity and I want to make sure it isn’t missed. Is there any one among you, and I’m speaking to my own children now, who would like to give up our work here and go with them?”

I sat still and watched them. The campers sat still too, with just their eyes shifting as they watched each other. Their chins were down and each seemed to want to draw as little attention as possible.

“This is your chance,” M’am went on after a pause to see if there were takers. “No other ship will come here for many months. Probably years.”

Another few moments of silence. Somebody coughed. Nobody spoke up.

“Please,” my mother continued. “Please listen to me, my dears. This is my life’s work. I will not abandon it. I would like to encourage you, each of you in your own heart, to think clearly about leaving now that there is a chance to go. I admit freely that this is a difficult environment, more unforgiving, more bleak than I ever imagined. I may have misled you. You may have imagined

something better. You may be disillusioned. We have lost friends here. We have lost lovers. I have no right to ask you to stay and every passion to bless you to leave. Please . . . if you want to go, speak now. No one will think ill of you."

Clark's eyes were big as baseballs. He stared at my mother, then, without blinking, shifted his eyes to me in helpless panic. Should he speak up again, or was he hoping I would?

My mother beamed at her own team members. Ultimately the beam of love turned into a humble smile. "I knew I had picked the best people out of all of Humanity. I knew when I saw your faces in the crowd that you were each so very special . . . to be this dedicated . . . so . . ." She broke off into an episode of fighting back tears. "I'm so very honored," she murmured through her hand pressed to her mouth.

Nobody jumped up to comfort her. They just looked down at their excuse for food.

"Um . . ."

The sound was almost a squeak.

All eyes flashed to the chemist with the bowl haircut.

M'am's eyes zeroed in on him. "Yes, Rusty?"

Rusty shifted in his seat, suddenly the center of attention. "I . . . might . . ."

"Go ahead," M'am pressed.

"I might . . . like to go with them."

His tiny voice boomed in the silence.

"Well," M'am said, "I don't blame you. You're young. This is no place to spend one's early youth when you should be at parties and dating young girls. We will all miss you, dar-ling, very much. We will have your excellent work to remember you by. Everyone, we must wish Rusty the very best and be happy for his choice. Today,

when I go out with the captain and my son, you'll go with me for a final walk through our adventure. It will be your swan song. Would you like that?"

In some kind of creepy cult thing, they all started halfheartedly applauding Rusty. He blushed and looked both relieved and . . . something else.

"You see? Life will go on," my mother continued. "The planet will adapt to the Xenomorphs. They are becoming part of the living biosphere. I'm on the edge of proving that. I need more time. I can prove it, I know I can. I have a sense for them. They have a sense for me."

She raised her perfectly appointed chin and gazed above all our heads to the dream she saw in her own mind. She stepped back from the table and, unless I was imagining it, struck a pose.

"Someday," she proclaimed, "I will walk among them."

\* \* \*

Clark and I, Bonnie, and the Marines sat wide-eyed with the boldness of the statement. Admittedly it was so bold, so wild, as to have a certain poetic shock value. She was an influential woman, the leader of a notable sociopolitical and scientific movement, and she was taken with her own press clippings. Maybe she had a right to be. I don't know. Her own people, my sister and the other misfits, were transfixed with worship. She had a nice little coven going here.

Or was their silence and awe really disguising another emotion?

I never had the chance to find out.

M'am took four calculated steps to the projector curtain. Her eyes narrowed in a mischievous way as she held her finger to her lips. "Shhh," she uttered.

She put her hand to a control panel and touch-padded a code.

The projector curtain beside her began to ripple, then to grow transparent once again. There, not more than a few steps away from the spot where my mother stood, and backdropped by the pink glow of the afternoon sun, were two of the monstrous adult aliens. One was back several feet, casually picking at its own tail the way a cat grooms itself.

The nearer alien was only steps from us, gazing upward at the glassy mountain which coifed our hiding place. The underside of its chin was a perfect triangle, fringed with gray-white teeth and a string of drool.

Everyone at the table froze in apprehension. Beside me, MacCormac made a slight shift of his hand toward his sidearm. I pressed my hand to his wrist and stopped him. Like frightened quail in the underbrush, we held perfectly still. Clearly, she was right—we couldn't leave the blind. Not yet. They were all around us.

My mother gazed in adoration at the creature which didn't know she was so near, near enough to slaughter with a sweep of its clawed hand, which hung in repose dangerously near the curtain. It saw only a projection of the landscape around it. If it drew any nearer, its breath might ripple the curtain and give us away. Or our mother's breath could do the same from inside.

She moved her hand very carefully from the control panel toward the curtain. She raised her fingers and moved her palm along the curtain to the level of the alien's hand. There she stood, in commune with the devil, truly in love with what she saw.

Her eyes glowed and she tilted her head in admiration and love. Her lips moved, and there was only the barest of whispering.

*"Some day . . ."*

# 7

“How does it work?”

“Light refraction, nanochips, electrical pulse, specialty scent masking, microvid units that assimilate the environment and replicate what’s behind you . . . lots of things. They also stop the natural sloughing of skin cells that happens naturally to people when we just walk around.”

Tad, the stealth guy who had somehow returned in one piece from his close encounter with the scorio-huggeroids, picked and poked the suit I was wearing. I’d never worn blue in my life.

And this wasn’t just “blue.” This was bleeeeeee. Electric blue. Las Vegas blue. This one was a superhero costume, all glowy and satiny, as if lit from within. It wasn’t unforgivingly body-hugging, luckily, but had some room to it, but was so weightlessly constructed as to be flexible and not baggy. In the front parts of the thigh sections, the part of the body less like-ly to bump or be fallen on, were the computer components that ran the smart elements of the suit. When I bent my arms or legs, the suit emitted a faint crinkling noise from the millions of emitter smart-fibers in the inner and outer mesh

layers and signal-channeling conduction foam sandwiched between them.

"If you stand absolutely still," Tad said, "the suit masks itself from their senses. There are certain wavelengths that they have trouble sensing. They probably won't notice you."

"It's the 'probably' that bothers me," I mumbled.

"You have to control yourself. It's hard," Tad warned. "Every molecule in your body says 'run,' but if you run, they'll see you."

"Like quail hiding in the brush? You have to hold your nerves?"

"And they're the devil to outrun, so don't think you can do that. You can't just put on a suit and go walk among them. You have to stand still and hope they don't bump into you."

I glanced at Clark, who was being fitted into his suit beside me. "Permission to beat ass, sir."

"Permission denied," Clark said as the chemist Rusty taught him how to pull the hood over his face. "I went diving a couple of times at Little Africa reef off the Dry Tortugas. This feels like that wet suit, only lighter."

"The elastomers are basically the same," Rusty said, "but they're embedded with sensors and emitters. They draw information and conduct emission from all the other layers. They even have a chemical element so we can make them broadcast certain aromas. I was in on the development of the formula range. Each suit is worth about fourteen million."

"How did you test the reaction of the Xenomorphs?" I asked.

Tad shrugged. "We hung up a suit and monitored their reaction to different emissions."

"Lost six suits," Rusty added.

Tad flashed him a cautionary glance, which I caught. "We're also working on holographics," he said quickly, "and anti-Xeno cages



that are acid-proof and caked with countermeasures and cloaking chips."

My mother came in, wearing a blue supersuit that made her look like a space opera diva. She surveyed us with way too much joy. "Are you ready for your tour?"

"Yes, ma'am," Clark said. "I have to tell you, I'm nervous about this. I don't like going out without the Marines."

"Your Marines would create more chances for trouble. The fewer people, the more we can control any chance of mistakes. You have been given your instructions on behavior? You must strictly obey them, or we cannot go."

"We'll comply," I said. I didn't want her to be watching me the whole time. "What about weapons? Defense?"

"We don't use them," she said. "Any energy discharge disrupts the field emitted by the suit. All you have to do is stand perfectly still. Even if you are seen moving, you can stand still and become lost in the panorama. In all likelihood, we'll not encounter any Xenos at all."

"How do you know?"

"Because we know where they are. We always scan the landscape on our visuals and heat-seekers before we leave the blinds. We might see them at a distance, but we observe them this way often."

"Hope I don't crap in your fancy suit," Clark admitted.

I made a face. "Couldn't mask that odor, could we?"

"All right," Tad concluded. "You're all on line. Put your boots on."

Rusty provided us with surprisingly comfortable and supportive blue boots with calf-high stovepipe uppers. Which was where I hid my plasma pistol.

Yeah, I know.

The four of us—M'am, Rusty, Clark, and I—moved out of the blind under the careful supervision of Tad at the entrance. This was some kind of mixed ceremony, a chance for my mother to show us things that would make her case, and Rusty's "last walk" before leaving the planet with the *Vinza*. I watched Rusty and had to admit he seemed comfortable with going out on this walk, despite my nasty hopes that he would be nervous or frightened. I had it in my head that M'am was setting us up, maybe to get rid of us, but the barometer of Rusty didn't bear that out. He had no hesitation about getting the suits and helping us with the picky donning process. Was it an honor to go out on this kind of "walk"? Did it show something I hadn't expected about my mother—that she wasn't holding a grudge?

Or did she just want to keep her enemies close?

Behind us, MacCormac and the other two Marines, Bonnie, and a handful of campers watched us with mixed emotions. Bonnie came to the perimeter at the last moment, and Tad pushed her back. The curtain closed over them, and all we saw after that was a near-perfect image of the canyonscape. The hiding techniques seemed artistic and modern, yet also seemed to be veils, not forts. If the veil were ever accidentally discovered, the aliens would just walk in with nothing to stop them.

Walking through the landscape of planet Rosamond 6 was both dream and nightmare. We followed my mother on unmarked paths which she clearly knew well, through the forest of glass columns and out onto an escarpment of plant growth of the kind only an artist's imagination or nature's wild wish list could conjure up. Pink vines draped hundreds of feet, stippled with fleshy cherry-like nodules, each with a tiny black fan sticking out of it.

"What are these?" I asked.

Rusty touched one of the little fans, and it happily fluttered. "That's its idea of a flower."

As we walked our trail, a strange sense of calmness came over me. My mother moved with such confidence at the head of the line that her demeanor was reassuring. She walked along without her blue hood, but we all did have gloves on.

I felt like a bad boy, having the plasma pistol hidden in my boot, but if I had to use it, I figured the cover would have already been blown. Can't break old habits quite this abruptly. Some people carried rabbit feet. Some people had lucky nickels. I had my plaz. Sue me.

The environment had gone from stark prismy red glass and black skulch to a lush gold and blue forest, and just when I started to get alien-planet overload, puffs of green fernlike growth started to line the path and declare that green was not just an Earth color. In fact, it was seriously green, bright green. Green that made Envy jealous.

"You can see," my mother began, "that there is wonderful growth here and many forms of life. There is algaeic life, microbial life, insect life, flightless birds, all the way up to pre-mammals. We think we may have seen mammals, but we are still researching. You see how beautiful it is here, and we have managed to live in this environment."

"How many outposts do you have?" I asked.

She looked back at me. "What?"

"Outposts. How many? The blind back there was the main one, right? You have others? Where other researchers are working?"

She continued walking. After what might have been barely too long, she finally said, "Yes, sometimes we have remote outposts. They're isolated for specific observations."

"Can we see one?"

“This is as far as we can go today.” M’am motioned us to her sides, and we discovered she was standing on a ridge. “Behold . . . the Blue Valley.”

And it was. Below us flowed a magnificent vista that could only be compared to a god-sized single peacock’s feather, with a dark eye at the bottom and waves radiating outward in shimmering circles of metallic blue and green, separated by rings of platinum and shot with strands of gold. The sun, now thinking about setting, shone through the red glass spires behind us and cast soft shafts of colored light into the Blue Valley.

And there was indeed life. Herds of large grazers with some sort of quills or stiff hair. Flocks of those flightless semi-ostriches with short necks and tall feathery coronets. Clouds of glitter-winged flitters. The pastoral scene was almost quaint. It was certainly hypnotic, the kind of thing that causes people to build hilltop mansions and get Adirondack chairs and tumblers of iced tea.

That might happen here, if Clark’s vision came true.

I looked to my right. He stood on the other side of my mother, gazing over the Blue Valley vista, thinking of the wonders of his simple mission, of how many people would find paradise here while he retired to his wahoo fields. I envied him his easy dreams. They were the kind that came true.

And Jocasta Malvaux gazed too. She was as proud of the Valley as if she had painted it on a canvas and it had come to life. This was her dream too, this planet and its creatures. She knew, and so did I, and Clark and all of us, what efforts were cast by eternity to come up with a planet like this, a living and breathing world finding its way to fruitfulness in a barren galaxy. I turned my gaze to the sky—yes, there it was, the all-important moon, with its green stripes and lazy

glow. Now that the sun was leaning its shoulder down, the moon opened its single petal.

"You see?" M'am said. "Here is a living environment, unafraid and adjusting. There is no cowering, no fear. No panic or confusion. They live their lives, and the Xenos are becoming part of the beautiful quilt. They serve their purpose, hunting the weak and the slow, leaving the swift and strong to reproduce and flourish. To interfere is immoral now. They have settled in. They are the splendid dogs of Anubis, handsome adapters who will melt into this environment and become one of nature's controllers. That they are sharks, that they are cobras, that they are wolves, raptors, and all this is both relevant and irrelevant. If predators reign, we must let them. There are limits. Nature knows the limits. They cannot destroy a planet. When the easy prey for them is gone, you'll see the Xenos die back to a balance. They will be out-performed by animals that are fleet of foot, that can fly . . . other strategies which will rein them in. I will remain here with my loyal few, to watch the history of the galaxy unfold, and bring the story home to Humanity. Someday I will walk with them and they will accept me."

Clark looked at me right over her head—he was tall enough and she was petite enough. I shook my head quickly and lowered my brows. *Don't say anything.*

"All I have to do," M'am went on, almost as though she were talking to herself, "is find out what triggers their higher senses. Whatever is necessary, I will learn to live among them and they will accept me as one of them."

Clark, on the other side of M'am, and Rusty here beside me, were either hypnotized or just freaked. I was particularly aware of Rusty.

"You cannot terraform a planet," she went on, "which has potential intelligent life, Captain. Not legally, not morally. Primarily,

there are very few of those. If this planet adapts, then you have no right. The Xenos are now indigenous. The Xenomorphs are potentially intelligent, if they are not already intelligent. They are already quick and smart, and they communicate. That overrides terraforming rights. You will not wipe out this excellent, successful species so humans can have this planet. We humans have had enough of that in our history . . . wiping out each other, wiping out whatever is in our way . . . and I will not have my own son becoming the next Stalin.”

I eyed Clark, and he shrugged at me in mute desperation. Did she have a point? Legally?

“To put humans here would ruin this paradise,” she continued. “Humans are the lice, the wreckers, the egos. If we try to have a war with them, we will lose. You and your poison robots . . . the Xenos will out-think you, out-wait you, out-evolve you. You want to take over the planet in a few months, but they will find ways to wait a century, if they must. You say the Xenos are BioHazard One? The impatience of Humanity is the true plague, Captain. These things take time, much time. Some people in my field of science have actually inherited their work from their parents and grandparents. My daughter will inherit this outpost from me. The only hope for your colony, your settlement, Captain, is to let me continue my work. We can’t live in spite of them. Someday, when my work is done and I have discovered the Xenos’ secrets, humans will be able to live *with* them.”

Her words brushed by and were carried on a breeze that had a faint scent of perfume. Had I been wrong about her?

I tried to maintain the level of cynicism I had forged about her, but today I had to admit there was a sliver of doubt. I hadn’t spoken to my mother or my sister in about five years. People can change,

can't they? The one thing I'd really been consistently good at in my life was not lying to myself.

So now I asked myself—why was I the only person on two worlds who didn't respect Jocasta Malvaux? If she was right and I was wrong, or if I bore any doubts—which at this moment I did—then we couldn't release the PPs. My friendship with Clark and the whole crew would be ruined. Everybody on Earth would be mad at me for denying them this second Earth.

But if she was right and this world could adapt, could flex a muscle and bring the Xenomorphs in thrall to the overarching controls of the environment, who was I to dispute a current and effective law? The Alien Species Act had been argued before Congress by people a lot smarter than I was. My mother could never have pushed such a thing through on her own. Somebody else had to consider the points. We were still on the cusp of its authority, of all this interaction with life not of Earth. The ASA was created in anticipation of alien life, not based on experience with it. It had also helped to boost exploration in space, which otherwise was a pretty hard sell. It caused dreamers to dream. This planet might actually be a researcher's heaven, on the edge of evolutionary leaps that could be witnessed in action and not just studied in fossil form.

If I weren't her son, would I think of her the way I did?

I should never have taken this assignment. The possibility that I might be too jaded, too close to the emotional core to see clearly over it. She was right—this was a living, breathing planet, with a beautiful biosphere just minutes from where the aliens stalked.

"We will retire now." M'am nodded in agreement with herself and led the way back down the same trail.

"Are we going in?" I asked. "We haven't had a chance to use our suits."

"You don't want that chance," Rusty said.

M'am looked at him and said, "I suppose it's good that you're leaving, then."

Her tone was sweet, but her eyes were chilling.

Was it just me?

We fell into a single-file line again and didn't speak. Silence, unless broken by M'am, was part of the rules.

I had no problem complying, except for the occasional urge to mutter some remark to Clark. I had a lot of questions for Rusty, though. Why was he leaving? Was he lonely, tired, or afraid? And what was the core of his fear?

The way I see it, anybody who *wasn't* afraid in this place was loopy. I don't mind adventure, but nobody in his right mind wants to live his life in the middle of a spider's web, trying to avoid the spider. You'd never get anything else done.

Good point . . . what kind of research could they possibly accomplish in an environment where most of the time they were fighting for their lives? Maybe that was why there were so many "I don't know" when we asked questions.

Gracie had said they were just beginning to do the research after finally setting up their camp and surveillance and other things. How long had they been here? The better part of two years? And they were just getting started?

All the way back to the blind, my skin was clammy with dread under the supersuit. Going into the alley was one thing, and turning around and walking out was another. I had always felt that knife between my shoulder blades, the one the thug sticks in your back after you think you've checked all the shadows.

I wished we'd been able to look around safely without the tour guide. How could I get back out there without my mother?



Seeing the projector curtain being held open by Neil, with Bonnie standing behind it and watching us approach—that was a good moment. We slipped inside, and the curtain was positioned artfully after us.

“It was beautiful, yes?” M’am asked.

“Can’t deny that,” Clark said.

She turned and said, “Rusty, if you would come with me for a moment?”

He nodded and followed her into one of the tunnels. The dinner table had already been taken down. The meal had been strained and quick. Nobody much wanted to talk after what they’d heard from Clark and me, and the party had broken up like a bad family reunion. “If you’ll come this way, Mr. Malvaux,” Neil said to me, “I’ll help you get out of the suit. We have to remove them and store them carefully so they don’t get damaged.”

“You can call me Rory.”

“Okay, thanks.”

I almost took a step to go with him, then got a flash of an idea. “Listen, why don’t you take Clark first? Captain’s privilege, and all.”

Clark smirked at me. “Privilege? I sleep last, I eat last, I get a shower last—”

I clapped him on the shoulder. “So this time you get to go first.”

“Can I have this moment bronzed?”

“This way, Captain.” Neil gestured to Clark, and they went off together, leaving Bonnie and me in relative privacy.

“What was it like out there?” Bonnie asked quietly.

“Breathtaking,” I admitted. “In a good way, I mean. Lots of native life, flora, growth, wilderness . . . real pretty and sort of sparkly.”

“Do you think I could see it? Tomorrow?”

I shrugged. “Think you’d look good in blue?”

She smiled in a clunky, awkward way. "You do."

"Oh, yeah?" I twirled once and modeled the contraption.

"I'd love to see what you saw," she went on mistily. "I love the diversity of life. What life is and why things are alive . . . space fascinates me because it has a chance for totally new life."

"What do you think of the environment that created the aliens?" I asked.

She paused and thought about it. "Well, it must be incredibly complex, with a long food chain. If you look at them evolutionarily, they're not all that different from us."

"What?" I blurted on a laugh. "You're crazy. Look at them!"

"Right, look at them," she persisted. "Relatively comparable in size to humans, within a few feet of height and not that different weight-wise . . . they have the heads on top and the feet on the bottom, arms with fingers, and we still have our tail bones, you know. In comparison to, say, even an elephant or a sparrow, they're much closer to us."

"I guess. My sister says we're just more animals."

She offered another little smile, this one less convincing, but I think that was only because she was insecure about herself, while not at all about what she was saying. She shrugged, almost apologetically, and suggested, "We're the only animals that care about other animals. Human life is the best thing evolution ever came up with. Humanity is what nature was heading for all along."

She was an insecure person, or maybe just shy, and yet I found her so attractive right now that she represented all that was best about people. I'd grown up in a world of eco-heads, who thought people were just about the worst disease ever to strike the universe. I'd never believed it—I was the odd kid out—and my mother never approved of my approval of mankind. It was like coming from a

religious family and just never seeing the logic in religions. I couldn't help it. I was born that way. I always saw the underside of the plate that was put in front of me.

And here was Bonnie, in this goofed out nest of vipers and their herders, the only one with the universe completely in order.

"What are you looking at?" She broke out in a nervous giggle.

I pressed my lips together in appreciation. "Know what you are?"

"What?"

"You're my mother if she were nice."

\* \* \*

We were interrupted when M'am and Gracie appeared on the other side of the stacked containers which created a maze of little semi-separate areas in this central chamber. I held my hand up to quiet Bonnie. I knew an opportunity to eavesdrop when I saw one. Had my stalling actually paid off?

"Send Rusty," M'am said. "He still has his suit on. Put this recharged power pack in. We want no trouble in that sector."

"Oh, I'll send him, all right," Gracie responded. "I'd like to send him down some deep hole somewhere."

"As we have found, nothing stays the same. Better to shed the detritus than try to glue it on."

"He makes me sick."

"Send him immediately. And remember to have him code his suit to the new charge frequency."

"Fine."

They split up, and Bonnie started to speak, but I motioned her silent, and in a few seconds Gracie reappeared with Rusty.

"Just get it done. Replace the third and fourth broadbands and clean the lens."

"Isn't it kind of late in the day for Sector Nine?" Rusty asked.  
"Another hour, it'll be dark."

"Then I guess you had better move your useless ass, should-n't you?"

"Aw, Gracie . . . "

"Turn around, traitor."

"Why?"

"Fresh power pack."

"Oh . . . thanks."

"Screw you."

I saw the point of her shoulder and a flick of long braid as she exited through the tunnel just opposite from where we were standing. I put a finger to my lips, signaling Bonnie to be quiet and stay here. Then I slipped out of our seclusion and caught Rusty at the projector curtain.

"Rusty, where're you going?"

He glanced around, not expecting that anyone else was still lingering around here. "Huh? Oh—I have to go do some maintenance in Sector Nine. It's my last official duty. I've done it before . . . just never alone."

"Is it a good idea to go alone?"

He seemed dejected. "I, uh, no, we usually go in pairs, but I've got the suit on already, so—"

"How about if I go with you?" I suggested. "I'm all dressed."

Rusty palmed his roundhead haircut and hesitated. "Doesn't sound like a good idea . . . I don't know, we've never had visitors. I don't know what the policy is. Maybe we should ask Jocasta first."

"I think I'm old enough to go out without asking my mommy. I'll behave. I'll be your rearguard. How about it?"

"I do have some fears about my rear," he allowed. "Guess it's okay."

Then he paused, and a strange thing happened. His eyes brightened and he pressed his lips flat, and said, "Yes! Good idea! Come on!"

Well, that was an odd change . . .

On the way out, I cast a glance back at Bonnie. She bit her lip and crossed her fingers in silent well-wishing. I put my finger to my lips again. *Don't tell anybody.*

She nodded.

Sector Nine was in the other direction from the way we'd gone with M'am. Rusty and I turned left instead of right out of the blind's curtained opening, and within just a few minutes the story began to change from the rosy glory my mother had wanted me to believe. This area had no lush beauty to boast, but soon turned decidedly less attractive.

And that wasn't just the landscape. Not more than seven or eight minutes out, Rusty cast me a glance at just the moment when a gassy odor struck me full in the face. I stopped walking, and sniffed. Rusty paused, his eyes wide.

I nodded at him. "I smell it."

He didn't say anything, as if wanting me to come to my own conclusion.

"As different as this planet is," I said, "the one constant in the galaxy is the smell of death."

Rusty closed his eyes for a moment of relief. He motioned me forward.

Within only a short distance, Rusty was leading me through a bone yard, the telltale leavings of assault. Skeletons and desiccated

remains of fairly large beasts, maybe the size of adult pigs, littered the land, so prevalent we had to zigzag through them.

"What's this all about?" I asked.

"The Xenos killed them," he said. "It's a whole herd, wiped out in less than four days. Hundreds of them. Even what they don't consume, they slaughter. We don't know why. They destroy just to destroy."

"So much for the pretty picture," I said outright.

"Jocasta just sees the pretty part," he told me. "Keep your voice down."

"Sorry."

"Keep your eyes open."

"Any my mouth shut. Right."

"Yeah, mostly."

The carcasses around us were grotesque, with their ribcages exploded or their heads torn off, limbs separated from bodies while still on the run, or spines pulled out from the bodies with shocking ease. They told a story of gratuitous violence that most animals didn't engage in.

That was it—I'd never thought about it that way before . . . these aliens were violent for the sake of violence, for the joy and pleasure of it. I was sure my sister would tell me humans had been engaging in that hobby for eons, and that was probably true, but other humans policed the violence and were disgusted by it. This killing field around me spoke of a unified delight and unrestrained purpose that was species-wide. The Xeno-morphs had no self-restraint, no moral guardrails, and no sheriffs among them. There was no controlling factor. They just killed to kill.

We moved with dispatch through the field of slaughter, and by the time we moved on to the next area, I was disgusted beyond

measure. We moved into a narrow passage flanked by what appeared to be very thin trees almost like fringe.

"Rusty, why do you want to leave?" I asked. I sensed he was afraid I'd want to know this, but also that he wasn't surprised to be asked.

"Just done my time here, is all. Ready for something different. Watch out for this web. Don't step in it."

I sidled away from the wide complex web he pointed to, which was spread across almost the whole path.

"Thanks. Look, I need a break, okay? I don't have all the time in the world. Can I get a couple of straight answers?"

"Like what?"

"Those people in the huts," I ventured, "were they locked in? Those huts were prisons, weren't they?"

He didn't answer right away. His hesitation stiffened my suspicions that things were darker than my mother wanted portrayed.

Rusty met my eyes as we came abreast of each other and picked our way through more bodies of animals, this time a flock of the flightless birds.

"You won't say I told."

"What is this, a Boy Scout troop?" Sarcasm didn't help. I chided myself with a glower and said, "Sorry. I won't tell."

He didn't seem reassured, and even lowered his voice, as if anybody could hear us out here. "They were incubation chambers. We took care of them the best we could. Jocasta said it was as kind as possible. Watch out for this crevice. Don't get your foot caught."

"So they were implanted with the . . . what do you call them, larvae? You shoved them into the hut and left the doors open to put food in?"

He blushed with humiliation. "We didn't feed them. It would've been—"

He cut himself off.

"What?" I demanded. "A waste of food?"

Ashamed, he nodded. We came around to a pathway that was actually a ledge. With a motion he warned me of the cliff we were now standing on. Rusty stopped and pointed.

Cliff . . . that was a crystal clear accuracy. The drop was shear and straight. We stood on the precipice of a two-thousand-foot ravine. Across the ravine, which was another thousand feet wide, was the floor of the Blue Valley. We were now level with the lush blue-green space, with its population of undisturbed herds and flocks, and from here I could see that the Blue Valley was actually a shelf. This ravine prevented access to it.

My mother had deceived me and Clark on purpose. The Blue Valley wasn't pristine or undisturbed by the Xenos . . . they just hadn't reached it yet. It was protected only by the huge protective gap now open before Rusty and me.

Rusty's eyes shifted to mine, and we understood each other. Postponing the inevitable didn't make it any less inevitable. He wanted me to see this.

"In a month," he said, "they'll be over there too."

He moved on, only another twenty feet to a sensor/transmitter array that had been drilled into the edge of the cliff, supported on a tripod. Rusty got down on his knees to reach the array and began to service it after rolling out a small set of very surgical tools. All I could do was watch.

"Why were the huts' doors open?" I pursued. "To hear their screams?"



“No . . . no. Even with the creatures in us, we were told we had no right to make our end swift and easy . . . no right to kill what was inside us. The infected people were locked in and the door was left ajar for the young to get out.” He hung his head briefly. “Jocasta kept them inside so the rest of us wouldn’t see the torture. Wouldn’t see the young Xenos burst out of their chests or the blood . . . she treats us like children. She ritualizes the bad things and makes them holy. Like the Catholic Church celebrates the torture and mutilation of Christ, makes it into some kind of nice holiday with little bunnies and pictures of sunshine. If you sanitize something enough, people will embrace it.”

The grimness of the moment betrayed many other dark truths about this place and the way of life the scientists had discovered here.

“I’m sorry, Rory,” Rusty quietly said. “I shouldn’t talk this way about your mother. I wasn’t brought up that way.”

I knelt beside him. “That’s probably the best description I’ve ever heard, from anybody.”

The compliment seemed to do him some good as he went on with his work.

Scanning the Blue Valley, way over there and seeming now like an oasis in a deadly desert, I asked, “I’ll bet the doors were left open because she wanted the little gargoyles to live. Right?”

“She doesn’t believe we have a right to kill them,” he confirmed. “I don’t blame her for that.”

“Don’t you?”

“We always knew that. She didn’t hide that part.”

“It’ll be good to go home, won’t it?”

He rolling his eyes and communicated a thousand fears and fatigues in that one moment.

I had a golden opportunity here. Like those times interrogating a witness, sometimes you have to know just how far to push—and when to take a leap.

“How many people have you lost, Rusty?” I asked, careful with my tone. “They’re not in other outposts, alive somewhere, are they?”

Slowly he shook his head. His mouth worked as if he were about to throw up.

Again, I prodded, “How many are dead?”

“God, I really shouldn’t be telling you this.”

“I’ll find out anyway. There’s no more hiding about things like that. How many of the original fifty-two are dead?”

Like a valve releasing, he said, “Thirty-six.” He turned to me in desperation. “We can’t live here. We can’t research here. They found every one of the other outposts. They never give up. They understand psychological warfare.”

“My sister said you waited them out. That it took five months for them to forget.”

Once again he shook his head, but not as if Gracie were wrong. It was as if Gracie knew the truth and had lied to me.

“They don’t forget,” he said. “It’s impossible for us to wait them out.”

“Then what is my mother up to?” I murmured, almost to myself. “If she knows you’re all doomed if you stay, what’s she trying to prove?”

He flopped back, knees folded under him, and stared down into the deep ravine. “She really seems to love them.” He sighed a couple of times, then suddenly perked up. “Let’s go back to your ship! Let’s go right now, okay? Why go back to the blind? We can launch tomorrow, right? Can we leave tomorrow?”

His desperation and excitement about the chance to leave confirmed what I had suspected—no matter what my mother said, these people needed rescuing.

I reached over and pressed his arm, hoping to keep the conversation on an informative track. There was no telling when I'd get another chance for clarity. "Who else wants to leave, Rusty? Who else is afraid to speak up?"

He parted his lips, and wasn't I surprised when the sound was a steady electrical chittering noise, fast and frantic. Rusty jumped to his feet without even using his hands to push off, and yanked his blue hood over his head and all the way down over his face.

Surprised, I bolted to my own feet. "What—what—"

"Stand up! Back up against the wall! Over here, over here! Stand still! Stand perfectly still!"

"Do I have to—do I turn it on?" Panic shot through me. "What do I do?"

"It's automatic! Pull your hood on!"

He reached for the back of my neck and for a horrifying few seconds we were both tangled up in trying to get my hood over my face. When we finally got it down, I was illogically confused by the fact that the hood seemed almost clear from inside, even though I could no longer see Rusty's face through his. More one-way-mirror fabric.

"Stand still!" He shoved me backward against the wickery of spindly growth, which felt like a wicker fence. "And be quiet!"

"Oh, shit!"

"And don't shit!"

How was I supposed to be still with my lungs heaving and my limbs quaking with panic? With monumental physical effort I

flattened against the wicker and nearly suffocated trying not to pant or heave. I never worked so hard in my life.

Rusty, because he had to tend to me, ended up having to position himself right at the edge of the ravine, between the array tripod and a jagged finger of black rock standing straight up on the cliff's lip. The rock was almost as tall as Rusty, and he pressed sideways against it to have something to brace against. With almost military poise, he came to attention and froze in place.

I fixed my gaze on him in pure admiration and wished like hell I could get halfway that still. His suit began to glow softly, emitting something—sound, scent, I had no idea what—that would send some message or other to whatever was coming.

Where were they? How close? Did we have enough time to run back the way we'd come, or was that the direction they were coming from?

My mind flashed on the destruction I'd seen, on the punched-out ribcages and the acid-dissolved flesh, the impaled throats and dismembered limbs. So far I'd only witnessed the creatures' power by proxy. What the hell was I doing here?

This was one of those moments when every attraction for coming on this voyage suddenly dissolved and became microscopic. All I wanted to be was back home, being chased down a blind alley by some drug-crazed gang of Satan worshippers. That I could handle.

That noise . . . there it was . . . the rolling, crunching slow approach.

The noise was faint, purposeful. My feet turned hot and itchy. This path wasn't covered with the cereal-like skulch, but was shear weather-shaved rock. The approaching noise was soft and hinting. In my head it turned loud, deafening, enough to set my ears to drumming.

I was still panting! How could I stop? I fought to breathe evenly.

Overcome by fear, I dared to whisper, "Am I glowing?"

Rusty's hand flinched. "Yes. Shh!"

Suddenly a huge black form leaped out of the unseen area around the bend. With a whump it landed between me and Rusty, arms up in a dare, knees bent, ready to leap again, and there it hunched, looking, sensing . . .

It had heard us. I'd tipped it off.

I wanted to kick myself—to run, to draw attention away from Rusty since I'd stupidly drawn it to him.

The alien was huge, bigger than the one Chantal had stuffed and mounted. Its elongated head was at least two feet above mine. Inside the smoked-glass skull rippled rows of cerebral sensors. The long anaconda tail drifted elegantly, held high and curled. Its outer jaws separated, drawing strings of saliva, and the creature began to sizzle in its throat.

The alien's shoulders rose, its knees bent more, long feet and claws scratching at the rock slab. The second set of jaws, the small square jaws, extended on their bony stick and made one decisive *snap*.

I knew a challenge when I saw one.

*Dare you . . . Show yourself*

*Know you're here*

It was a scout. Its job was to tease out whatever was in the path of the others. There could be a dozen behind it, or a hundred. Did they swarm or herd? There was a difference.

Rusty and I were only about seven feet apart. The alien stood almost perfectly between us. If it pivoted, that tail could hit either of us.

Rusty held his ground right at the edge of the cliff. His blue suit glowed softly, emitting a pale silvery corona all around his body. He was masterful in his stillness and I envied his self-control. I wasn't managing so well.

The alien hissed and threatened, turning its long tubular head as if it were listening for clues. All its senses were being scrambled or confused by the supersuits and somehow it couldn't tell we were here. I had to give a nod of approval to my mother's research team. They'd done it—they'd found out what *didn't* trigger the alien's senses.

I breathed a *wow*.

The alien's head snapped around to face me. I sensed it knew I was here—probably the same deep instinct that told it I was nearby.

We sensed each other. Now the sheer terror helped me to freeze in place, the kind of reaction I'd spent my professional life avoiding.

Rusty, a silvery man-shape a few feet away, made a scrape with his toe. Very short, very deliberate.

The alien snapped around. So it could hear, for sure.

Its spiny back twisted at my eye-level. Its tail floated past my face so close that I had to raise my chin to keep the spike from touching my nose.

Rusty stood absolutely still in his silvery corona. The alien hunched its spiny back, its snorkels fanning outward as it moved in small serpentine motions, never quite still, not quite moving. The huge head came down as if to run its teeth along the glow of Rusty's arm. If it pushed, nudged—it would find him.

Could I scrape my toe and distract it the way he had done for me?

But he was the expert here, the one who knew how to move among the grizzlies. If I took him into the crime district of a major metropolitan area, I'd expect him to let me make the moves.

My upper arms twitched, aching. My thighs trembled. The alien's tail whipped past my face again. I had no doubt that spike could take off my head.

Then, just when I felt as if my legs were breaking from tension, the alien relaxed its shoulders and turned its face away from Rusty. The second set of jaws, on their cartilaginous extension rod, drew back into the elongated main teeth, and those teeth closed into their relaxed position. The tail fell lower and stopped whipping, instead moving in gentle balancing motions to the shifting of the body. The creature took on a poised grace, that cobra beauty my mother saw when she looked at them. At this moment of near-death, I saw it too. She was right—they were the dogs of Anubis.

The supersuits were working. We had a chance to live. Our trust in technology was fulfilled.

Turning its body again to the path, the alien changed its posture, bringing its snorkels parallel with each other again, and it began to move past us.

I saw a flicker across the path. Heard something too. A crackle of electric surge. The silver corona around Rusty's suit began to sizzle and change color from silver to a sick yellow. Rusty's head moved, as if to look down at himself. In that deep place in a human mind that recognizes another human's body language after a lifetime of practice, I knew from that small change that he was in trouble. From the other side of the path, I watched with the terrible realization that his suit was malfunctioning.

## 8

The alien's bullet-shaped face snapped around toward Rusty. Its lips peeled back on a warning hiss. Again the shoulders came up, the knees bent to spring and the tail whipped.

Rusty's hands twitched as he tried to decide whether to grab for his power pack or the controls in the thighs of the suit. With each movement he destroyed the finely constructed field of disguise. What the alien saw, I don't know—ripples, flickers—but it saw something and it crouched into a threat position.

My mind raced. What should I do? Distract it? Make myself the target? There was no jumping on it— that was suicide.

Rusty shifted in burgeoning panic. His suit chattered and failed entirely with a weak final szzz. He ripped back the hood, and in that second the terror in his face was heartbreaking. I don't know why he pulled the hood off— something about looking death in the face?

"Oh, my dear Lord," he murmured at the creature, as if it understood.

The alien responded with a punctuated roar that separated its main set of teeth into a wide-open spiked weapon. This time the second set of teeth stayed in, but made a sharp snap at Rusty.



It leaped at him. Rusty let out a single yelp as the animal sprang. Its long limbs made quick work of the few steps between them. As Rusty yanked backward, the alien's teeth clapped shut on the flopping blue hood instead of his head, but its long fingers and claws cupped his head and sank into his shoulder. His arms came up in defense and the two bent into a wicked embrace.

A bird in the claws of a young cat, Rusty bellowed in agony and terror. Even in the middle of his desperation, he found the empathy to shout, "Run! Run, Rory!"

And he began to scream that bone-breaking high-pitched scream that can't be faked.

Moving was almost a relief. But I didn't run. I pushed off the wall and grabbed the alien by the tail. My hands, in the blue gauntlets, fitted into the spine-like segments and I put all my weight into pulling backward. The animal had Rusty by the hood with its mouth, and its hands had him by the ribs. When I dropped backward, almost dipping my butt to the ground, it parted its teeth, dropped the blue hood, and growled at me.

And I almost crapped my trousers. That was some sight. The dead one in the blind had been hideous enough, and now this.

I tucked the animal's tail under my left arm and clamped my arm down so I could use my right arm to go after my plasma pistol. I drew on it and fired instinctively. The plasma blast blew a hole in the alien's braincase a little forward of the middle, splattering acid on Rusty, who threw his arms up to shield his face. Acid droplets began to eat away at his sleeves, causing streams of green smoke to rise from the fabric. He made an awful gasping noise and writhed back toward the cliff's edge, and one foot went over the side. He toppled over like a bottle knocked off a table.

His weight took the alien with him. I would've fired again, except the first shot caused my supersuit to fritz and spark. Damn! The energy flush must be disrupted by the plasma bolt!

A jolt of shame struck as I realized there really had been good reasons for telling us not to take weapons along.

As the alien's tail whipped powerfully in my arms, coiling around the back of me, I dropped the plasma pistol. It fell between me and the cliff's edge. Now bearing the weight of Rusty and half of the alien's body, I fell to the ground and used my heels to dig in. That wasn't going to last—the physics weren't there.

Over the cliff, Rusty gasped and cried out in panic, still in the grip of the alien, and the damned thing wasn't dead yet. As their weight dragged me to the edge, I braced my left foot on the embedded housing for the video unit, clamped my left arm down as tightly as possible, and grabbed outward for my plasma pistol with my right hand—and caught it.

I brought it up shooting. Three bolts flew wild, arching down into the ravine two-thousand feet below us in what would've been a real pretty display if only somebody had been around to appreciate it. Rusty and I, we were busy.

Just as my legs started to inch over the cliff's edge, I gritted my teeth and aimed, and fired.

This bolt went right into the back of the alien's long head and powered through to the front, then took out its entire excuse for a face. The skull case broke in half the long way and fell to the sides in two unevenly cut pieces. In a final convulsion it dropped Rusty.

With one long pitiful howl, Rusty tumbled into the ravine, his arms flapping and legs pumping. I dropped the animal's big tail, and it went over too. Together they spun into the depths. I twisted around and looked over in time to lose them both in the toupee of

overgrowth below. Another second, and Rusty's cry abruptly stopped.

Not only had I lost a good man, I'd now lost the only other person who knew this was no paradise about to be born. Would anyone else believe me?

And then, I heard the crunching sound. The rolling sound. The advance scout was dead, but his roars had been heard.

\* \* \*

I got up and ran. Somehow I still had my plasma pistol in my right hand, but my left gauntlet was missing, probably over the cliff, caught in the alien's tail. My suit stopped fritzing because I wasn't shooting. I ran down the grade, hearing the clicks and hisses of aliens—no idea how many—behind me all the way. I tried to tell myself it was my imagination, that I was just spooked, overwrought, scared—but, no, they were there, coming for me.

At the bottom of the grade I skidded to a halt and, lungs heaving, tried to stand-pet again, to stand perfectly still and let the suit reboot itself and begin the masking technique it was developed for. If it fooled one of them, it could fool several. A whole herd. Right?

I tried to stand still. Maybe I didn't do it right. The suit began to glow and make that faint hum, only to fritz and crackle just when it got going. I'd wrecked it! I'd ruined the effect by shooting my plaz! The electromagnetic pulse had completely fried my only hope.

I had to live through this hour. I had to save these people. If there were more like Rusty, but afraid to speak up—and I had to save Clark and Bonnie, so close to falling under my mother's spell. The message of the slaughter fields had to be delivered.

At the top of the grade, in the last vestige of the setting sunlight, I saw them. They were black silhouettes against the crest of the hill

and the evening horizon, a solid line of undulating heads and tails, hands and snorkels, as if dozens of aliens were being melted into a black stew.

The suit fritzed again, as if to say, “Go!”

I fired twice over my shoulder as I ran. Shrieks rewarded my shots, but also howls of anger. The suit crackled one final time, overwhelmed by the energy flush from the pistol. It was all done.

I rounded a bend, went through the stick-like field, jumped and dodged the seemingly endless carpet of corpses in all their many stages of decay, racing the best I could in the fading light through the killing field that would soon describe the whole planet, if these creatures had their way. If I survived, what could I say to the others? Were there more like Rusty, but afraid to speak up? His suit had failed—that was no coincidence. Fresh power pack, sure! It didn’t take a forensic team to add that up, did it? This was what my mother meant by “a last walk.”

They were on me the whole way back. I didn’t know whether they could outrun me or whether they had the inclination to and wasn’t interested in clocking them, but I’ll bet I set a record or two that I could wave under the noses of a few high school acquaintances. I traveled down two slides on my ass, which shaved off seconds and put a whole new definition to thinking with my legs, like Clark said.

When I hit familiar territory I was rewarded with a surge of victory, like maybe I’d actually get out of this alive. Only then, when I caught sight of the patch of landscape which I knew was the projector drapery, did I skid to an insane halt and catch myself on a glassy stump.

I couldn’t go in there! I couldn’t blow everybody else’s cover! If just one alien saw me run through the opening, every person inside

was doomed.

With a sinking stomach I veered away from the hiding place. I hoped I'd turned in the direction of the ship, like possibly I could make it back there and hope somebody would open the ramp for me, hope they were on their toes, because I had no idea how to make the ramp open from the outside. Nobody had ever taught me that—who'd have thought I'd need to know it?

Before I even made it up the flume, while still in sight of the projector curtain, they rounded the bend and closed on me. They swept past the hiding place and up the flume toward me. I fired again with my plasma pistol, repeating the shots, hoping to discourage them. My plaz was beginning to weaken, almost out of power. It was never meant to be an assault weapon, fired more than eight or ten times. It was just for self-defense.

Self-defense—what a joke!

The rank of Xenos were behind me, and now two of them appeared in front of me. They'd headed me off.

Skidding to a halt, with nowhere to run, flanked by glass columns and trapped on every side, I shouted wildly in that last moment when all I could do to save my life was shout, even knowing it wouldn't work. And they were on me.

One of them came out of the circle as they closed on me, possibly a leader or just the one that got to me first. I threw my drained plaz at its head. The gun made a silly *pok* on the creature's skull and bounced to the skulch. The animal looked down at the gun, and at that moment I leaned back on a broken glass stump and brought my foot around in the best kick of my life.

I knocked out some of its teeth. Good for points, but it had no effect except to make the creature mad at me.

"Come on!" I screamed. "Come on!"

It tilted its head at me and hissed. The jaws parted and the second set made a quick series of snaps at me. The other aliens closed around us, making an unbreachable fortress for my demise. My pounding heart slowed and I could suddenly breathe again as I accepted my fate.

“Make it fast,” I said.

The creature stiffened before me, hunkering into a threat position. Its claws clicked inches from my face.

A soft, long noise began on a finger of wind. It came from over the rocks, through the glass spires, from far away, like thunder.

No, not thunder . . . this sound was like the low hum of a brass instrument, a baritone or trombone, or two together making a chord. I thought at first it was the sound of my blood running cold. Then I knew it was real sound and I was really hearing it.

The alien before me raised its head and turned the great long skull as if trying to hear the location of the trombone call. Its companions did the same, each turning its head in the same direction.

Was I still alive? For a few seconds, I honestly wasn't sure.

The long moaning call grew in intensity over the land. The aliens around me straightened to their full heights and extended their tails horizontal with the ground. Inside the smoke-glass tops of their skulls, the flesh of their brains— or whatever that was—began to ripple and buzz in answer. The buzz increased and became the same low, moaning, brassy call.

The alien in front of me stepped back. It lowered its hands and tail, shoulders and snorkels. I recognized the passive stance. For creatures I hadn't wanted to be anywhere near, never thought I would get to know, I recognized a lot all of a sudden.

Through the long moaning call, I heard the shouts of human voices. At the crest of the flume, Colonel MacCormac appeared with Clark, flanked by Carmichael, Edney, Pocket, Bonnie, and Tad, and in the middle of them, oddly out of place, appeared my mother. She was yanking MacCormac's arm just as he raised his weapon, and Edney had to kick at Tad to get him to leave her alone with her weapon raised. I got the idea they'd charged out of the blind against her orders, and she and Tad had been sucked out with them, trying to stop them. Carmichael and Edney raised theirs also and prepared for MacCormac's order to volley.

I raised my hand in a signal to them. *Stop.*

MacCormac, ever alert, caught the motion and held fire. The other Marines, well-drilled, did the same.

The fluttering inside the alien's braincases became softer, all at once. It was as if they were all singing in a choir, being directed by some conductor in the sky. They lowered their heads and drew up their tails, let their arms down and became sordidly calm, reminding me of black storm clouds.

I motioned again to the others to stand still, not break the sorcery. What were we seeing?

The alien right in front of me, the one who had been about to take my head off, relaxed suddenly. The deep sound of horns tapered off and echoed into nothing. The land was once again still in the last vestige of sunset. The last ray of the sun lay on the head of this alien.

I pushed myself up off the stump and braced my legs, standing before the animal in a truly eerie equality. This was like being haunted.

Armored by the heady drug of having accepted my death, I was emboldened to reach out. I slapped the animal in the head.

Its head tipped sideways, then came back straight. It made no moves to retaliate. It didn't want the fight I was trying to pick. Didn't want—or wasn't allowed. I didn't know which.

I took off my right gauntlet and slammed the creature right in the mouth.

It shook that great head almost the way a horse shakes its withers. But it wouldn't attack me.

"Well, dang," I grumped.

I wanted, strangely enough, to ask my mother what she thought of this. Maybe she knew.

As if called by a mental signal, M'am moved forward from the others, leaving MacCormac and the Marines, Bonnie, Clark, Pocket, and Tad stood poised to run, shocked by the stillness. My mother came closer, daring to step between two aliens, who simply turned their eyeless faces toward her and stepped back to let her pass.

"What's happening?" I choked. "What . . . what is this?"

M'am's petite body, in khakis and still build like the ballet dancer she had been in her youth, turned in a delicate pirouette of study.

"I'll tell you what's happening," she murmured. "This is a giant leap forward."

As my chest ached with plain old terror, she came to the center of the circle of aliens. She raised her wrist to her lips, and touched the communication link strapped to it.

"All of you, come out. It's safe to come out. Graciella, bring everyone out. This is history. You must see this."

In mere moments, the other researchers, led by my astonished sister, appeared in the line of humans at the crest of the flume. My sister stared, poised for something she couldn't predict, and with her came Diego, Zaviero, Chantal, Dixie, Neil, Oliver, and the others. Amazing, really. They had all actually come out at my mother's call,



without the slightest question. Were they more afraid of her than of the aliens? Could that actually be true?

And there she was, arms raised in honor of the creatures standing here in the small area with us. You must see this, she had said. What she really meant was, you must see *me*.

"Come," she said to the audience. "Come, witness all of you . . . and you who were ready to exterminate them . . . you, who can now go home. Witness this evolutionary leap! I told you it would happen. Nature is controlling them." A necromancer performing her danse macabre, she raised her graceful hands. "We can walk among them!"

\* \* \*

I don't believe in my life or any time in history I've heard of a more fulfilled human being than my mother at this arcane moment of transcendence. For her, this was a religious experience. The gods had opened the doors and invited her in.

She was allowing us to see, to be her witnesses, not exactly to walk in with her.

We all stood stupefied, waiting for the spell to be broken and chaos to erupt. For a while it didn't. Then, it did.

Just as we were beginning to believe that we might be safe through some bizarre favor of providence, a chittering noise broke the enchantment. I heard Bonnie gasp. She clapped her hands to her mouth. MacCormac spun to his right, then left. Carmichael and Edney brandished their weapons.

Suddenly, leaping from glass pillar to glass pillar, came a squall line of face-huggers on the attack. Pocket grabbed Bonnie and shoved her toward me, toward the middle of the circle of Xenos. Tad and Gracie came together into what might very well be a final embrace. The huggers moved with breathtaking speed, sensing that

several of them could fulfill their genetic goal today, to impregnate a creature with their seeds of doom down some poor sap's throat. And here we were, sitting ducks.

"Oh, God," Gracie croaked. "A trap . . ."

Our mother twirled again, looking now at the horrid position we were all in. Thanks to her, we were all in it together. She'd brought everyone out to witness the wonder.

MacCormac shouldered his weapon in a quick movement, but at the same instant the parasites began to leap—all at once. No volley could get them all without also killing all of us. All he could hope to do was take ballistic shots and maybe bring down a few of them before they overwhelmed—

For the third time today I prepared my self to die, and again I got a shock. The aliens flanking my mother turned and snatched the face-huggers out of the air by their fingers, by their tails, by the body like lobsters snatched from nets. More and more face-huggers attacked, only to be snatched out of the air by their own adult soldiers. High-pitched shrieking drove us to cover our ears and writhe toward the ground while the adult Xenos ripped into the huggers, whipping them like toys, smashing them into rocks, tearing their limbs off and casting them away to flop in desperation on the ground. Acid spurted and bones snapped as loudly as firecrackers as the butchery gained momentum. What moments ago had been an unspoiled clearing now became a slaughter zone. Face-huggers tried to leap to reach us, and I saw Bonnie, then MacCormac pointedly rescued at the last moment by the adult aliens. It was sheer deliberate butchery.

Instead of attacking us, they were attacking their own.

## 9

“Come on!” MacCormac waved the direction back toward the blind, then snatched my mother by the wrist and dragged her out of a tornado of aliens slaughtering their own offspring. I dodged between two slashing tails and scrambled in the same direction just as a parasite was swung through the air by its tail, eight fingers scrambling, and was splattered on a glass pillar like a bug hitting a window. I dodged sideways into a jet of spittle from one of the adults as it sprinted to catch a face-hugger just as the grabby little bastard would’ve clamped onto my head. The hugger squealed and was dragged back into the cockfight.

We out-of-place humans dodged toward each other, trying to get out of the middle of the maelstrom. MacCormac took a few shots and blew away one or two huggers, as the other Marines quickly coordinated an escape through the catfight of aliens.

Pocket was there to pull me over the crest. “What’d you do?” he yelled, his ponytail bouncing between his shoulderblades.

“Pissed ‘em off somehow! Move!”

Tad dragged Gracie, Clark pushed Bonnie, MacCormac hauled M’am, the other Marines led the way, and we ran for our silly little

lives from the deliberate extermination of seeds by the very tree that had borne them.

I knew a window of opportunity when I saw it, as did we all. For the first time since leaving Earth, everybody on this planet was of one mind. We flew back the way we'd come, to the curtained entrance to the blind, and I guess we just hoped none of the aliens was watching to see where we went. Sometimes you just have to make the dive and hope for the best.

I was the last one in. I pulled the delicate curtain closed, remembering only at the last moment that it was actually delicate, and took a last look over the crest of the flume. No aliens appeared to see our hideaway. Still, I could hear them. The noise of the holocaust going on over the hill was accompanied by a smothering odor of acid and oil.

"Shut it, shut it!" Clark panted at my side. He pushed the curtain closed. "You haven't seen enough?"

"I wish I knew what I just saw! Where's my mother? M'am!"

"Yes. Here." She was lost in the crowd of taller people. "Keep your voice down."

With Herculean effort, I dialed down the volume as I pushed between Tad and Gracie to face her down. "What did we just see? What was that all about?"

Gracie edged between me and our mother. "Don't speak to her in that tone."

"Tone? What did we just witness out there? Why would the adults rip their own young to shreds?"

M'am began to pace quietly. "Their priorities have shifted, obviously."

"We have to test this," Gracie said anxiously. "Make experiments . . . design trials . . . compare—"

I growled, "How about if we evacuate and worry about comparisons a long time from now?"

Our mother snapped her fingers at us. "Be quiet, I told you. You could risk all our lives with your noise."

"Aw, I wouldn't want to do *that!* Admit that you've lost control of this situation, if you ever had it."

She raised her green eyes to me. "Not at all."

"What's going on, M'am?" I demanded. "They not only didn't kill us, but they refused to fight with us. What makes consummate predators suddenly sublime?"

"It was like a feeding frenzy," Bonnie pointed out, "except with their own kind. In a frenzy, anything is fair game. They were very particular about what they killed. One of them deliberately pulled a spider-thing off my leg and broke it in half." She showed the torn trouser near her ankle.

I nodded and pointed at Bonnie's leg. "That's right. Why did they kill their own kind? Why did they protect us?"

Clark, now sitting exhausted on a crate, raised his head. "They *did* protect us, didn't they?"

Bonnie parted her lips to speak, then held back, no doubt intimidated by my mother and sister, who were such experienced scientists while Bonnie felt she was just starting.

"Say it," I charged her.

She flinched. "Oh . . . I . . ."

"Go ahead."

She floundered briefly under the scrutiny of these experts. "Aggressive predators only protect three things . . . their young, their territory, and their prey."

"Oh, that's helpful," Gracie snarled. "As informative as an afterschool special." She waved her hand at me. "This is the kind of

experts you bring along and you have the gall to question us?"

"Are you even going to ask about Rusty?"

M'am faced me with a bitter glare. "Rusty was incautious. He took too much time. Because of you, no doubt."

My mother continued her pacing, with her arms folded and one hand pressed to her lips. "This is new," she admitted. "Behavioral changes like this are scientific gold. There's no record of any such behavior *en masse*. Life is fighting back." She paused in front of Clark and faced him. "You must take your ship and go. My team can't leave now. This could go on for months. Years. I can study them. Catalogue unimagined volumes of information. We've stumbled upon a treasure. Everything is different. They've accepted us."

Bonnie's eyes got big with recognition as the fantasy began to flag and she finally saw my mother for the obsessed phantom she was. I didn't like seeing the illusion die, but was glad to have Bonnie entirely on my side.

"Whatever happens," my mother went on, "no one must leave the blind until the area is completely clear. We have no way to define this behavior—"

"Oh, wrong," I said. "If we can walk through them, then this is the *perfect* time to leave."

"This is the time to *stay*," M'am countered. "Nature has given us a doorway. This shift in focus could go on for months. Years! We can study them and they will even protect us!"

"A team of synthetics can do this work!" I said, matching her tone. "It's time to cash in our chips and honor the people who have died here and move out. All of us should head straight for the ship and get the bejeebers out of here. Tonight."

"Seconded!" Pocket supported.

"Sounds firm to me," MacCormac chimed.

Gracie rounded on him. "Great, coming from a man who led them into this mess without knowing what he was facing. Why don't you just plan the next picnic too?"

"You can leave," our mother said, unmasking some of the bitterness she held toward me. "But in the morning, when things are calmer. This area is dangerous now, you foolish boys. This is not the time to listen to my son's juvenile defiance."

"I thought you said they go underground where they pick up ambient something at night, so night is better for moving around. Do you know these creatures or not?"

"I agree with Mr. Malvaux," the Colonel said. "We're going to bug out as soon as possible and all the researchers are going to be compelled to come with us. The situation's too volatile to leave anybody here."

M'am's eyes narrowed and shifted to him, but she said nothing. Behind her Gracie wrinkled her nose in contempt. Tad slipped his hand onto her shoulder, but he also said nothing.

"I need a chance to think this through," Clark uttered. "We sure can't go out there right now. They could just as easily turn on us again."

"You will wait until they move on," my mother said. "Decisions about your ship can be made in the morning. In a compound such as this, you learn to be patient and wait things out." She sought out the crowd of confused and spooked people. "Neil—dear, be sure all the video feeds are recording. We'll want to have records of this new behavior. Chantal and Ethan, be sure to process all the data as soon as possible. If there are large flocks moving, we must know the dynamics and behavioral subtleties. Paul, we will need readings of atmospheric changes, if any. Diego, Dixie, all of you . . . don't be so

overwhelmed that we miss opportunities. Monitor your posts. Gather data. Find answers.”

Neil, pale and shaken, glanced around self-consciously and acted as if he couldn’t believe he was being asked to do something so mundane at this monumental moment. He went off into the maze of chambers, followed by Chantal and Ethan. After a few seconds, Paul, the weather and rock guy, went off into another tunnel. Diego, the bacteria guy, lingered a little, then he too went somewhere. Zaviero looked uneasy, then trundled off to do something about bugs. Before long, only Bonnie, Clark, Pocket, and the Marines were left here with me, my mother, my sister, and Tad. The smaller group seemed more intimate, more manageable.

I stalked away, knowing that I needed to get control and think clearly. My mother always brought out the worst in me, even when she wasn’t trying.

“Hey—Rory,” Clark called. He got up and came to me, took me by the arm and turned me so he could look at the side of my leg. “You’re bleeding.”

I twisted around to look at the back of my right thigh. Yeah, ripped supersuit and blood. “Okay, thanks.”

“You want attention?” Bonnie asked. “I have—I have my kit—somewhere . . .”

I gazed down at my bloody thigh. Clark held my arm, and we paused there, each thinking about different things. During that moment of calm, a little oasis of time during which my wildly ranging thoughts began to coalesce, I suddenly fell silent and just stared at my leg. Predators . . . prey . . . territory . . . prey . . . prey . . .

But nobody knew whether the aliens ate humans. We just knew they *used* humans. We might not be prey. We were something else.



Not prey, not their young, not their territory . . . what were we to them? In the big scheme, why would they protect us?

"You okay?" Clark asked.

I blinked at him. His honest face and tousled red hair, pure concern for me in the middle of possibly losing his dream and ending up maybe dead . . . this was one pure and simple guy.

"Simple," I murmured. "There has to be a simple answer."

They all watched me. I felt like an egg about to hatch.

"Like what?" Clark asked.

Just as the pain finally hit me and my leg started to throb, I uttered, "I don't know yet. But what if they snap out of it?"

The answer seemed to float just outside my reach.

"Graciella," my mother spoke up, "and Tad, please, check the perimeters. Do a heat-seek check. Secure all the openings and post watchers. I think we're safe for now. This behavior could continue indefinitely. We have a new chapter, and we must take the responsibility of careful data keeping. Nothing will happen until morning, and then we will escort these intruders back to their ship." She looked at Clark, then at me. "They cannot legally terraform a planet with potentially intelligent life. The problem is over. They will leave us in peace."

"I wouldn't bet on that," I warned. No sense letting her fantasize any more.

After a calculated pause for flare, she turned and led Gracie and Tad out of the chamber.

We were alone. Us intruders.

"Sit here, Rory." Bonnie opened a folding chair that Pocket handed her. "I'll bandage that."

"Strip out of that suit," Pocket told me.

Like a gang of personal assistants, they plucked and pulled until the supersuit was a lump on the floor, with its sensitive science and its torn leg. I pulled on a T-shirt and sweatpants that Pocket conjured up—now, that was a good bosun, able to come up with merchandise in a completely foreign environment. He had a touch, for sure. Suddenly I was a lot more comfortable and for some reason felt very vulnerable.

Clark stuffed me into the folding chair—I hadn't even noticed that they had chairs at all—and I hung my arm over the back and sat sideways so Bonnie could clean up my leg. I had no idea when the injury had happened, no idea whether it was from a tail slash or a shard of red glass. Didn't care.

Clark sat down nearby. MacCormac and his two Marines tried to get comfortable without exactly relaxing.

"She didn't ask," I uttered.

"Who didn't ask what?" Pocket knelt beside Bonnie and helped her clean my wounded thigh.

"My mother," I said. "She didn't even ask what happened to Rusty. She just said he wasn't cautious enough. She wasn't interested in what actually happened to get him killed."

"You think she doesn't care?"

"I think she already knew."

MacCormac leaned closer, suddenly interested. He waved back the two younger Marines, who were clearly spooked and out of their element.

Clark shook his head. "Don't get paranoid on us, Rory. You know they can see a lot with those installations of video feeds. She probably already knew because it was fed through on a camera. Keep your head."

"Keep my head? I'm trapped here with a bunch of eco-terrorist bug-huggers. This is her dream? To be out there in the middle of those things? My mother actually thinks that if she learns enough, she can live among those things? This isn't an expedition! It's a cult!"

"Bonnie, what do you think?" Clark asked. "You're a doctor and you know a lot about animals . . . have you ever heard of something like what we saw out there?"

We all looked at her, which caused Bonnie to flush with self-consciousness. "I'm not the expert . . . Mrs. Malvaux might be right . . . but . . ."

"Go ahead," I said. "You're as smart as she is."

She smiled in a small way. "Oh, wow . . . thanks."

"Was she right?" Clark prodded. "Could this period of change, whatever the change is, when they leave us alone and go after each other, could it last for years?"

"Are you asking me about precedents in nature?"

"Whatever you think."

She dabbed antiseptic on my wound, which I have to say was finally waking up and starting to hurt, and took her time formulating an answer. "It might last," she finally ventured, "but violent behavior within the same species doesn't usually represent a norm. Doesn't usually last protracted lengths of time."

"In other words," Pocket finished, "we're not all that safe."

"We're not safe at all," I told them. "Clark, you have to stick to your original mission. Evac this planet and release the PPs to eradicate the aliens. We have to save these people. There must be more like Rusty, who want to go home but are afraid to speak up. You have to take charge, you and the colonel here. She's got this Kum-Bah-Ya thing going with these people she pretends to care about, but whenever they die, somehow it's their fault. It's never her

fault or the fact that they're here, and it's certainly never the aliens' fault. These laws don't fit the situation anymore. You have to make a decision, Clark, maybe one that's beyond the letter of the law. You have to be a captain and not just one of the drones."

"Sucks," Pocket commented. "No mission, no bonuses."

"Oh, there'll be bonuses," MacCormac spoke up. "For the next ship."

"What next ship?" Bonnie asked.

"The one that comes after we go home, and releases the PPs that we didn't release. You don't think this is a done deal, do you?"

Clark twisted to look up at the colonel.

"That's right!" Pocket exclaimed. "It'll get done anyway, and nobody'll ever trust the *Vinza* crew for another mission! We'll be space dust!"

"You'll retire, all right, Clark," I said, "and some other guy'll come out here and do to those aliens what they do to everything in their way."

Clark put his hand out to calm the storm. "I'm not releasing a hundred thousand robotic hunter killers until I think this out, bonus or no bonus, retire or not. I don't want to break the law."

"This is bigger than the law," I said. "The Alien Species Act is fiction. It was made up before any of the details were known, before anybody really knew anything. There was one rumor of one ship fifty-odd years ago, and one expedition from which I don't think anybody survived. It's based on nothing. On my mother's imagination. A rosy picture, I might add, and with money and influence she pushed it through. Let me ask you this—can you believe that, after we get back and tell this story, that the Alien Species Act won't see a lot of amendments and refinements?"

Clark shrugged. "True . . ."

"Then how can you suffer over obeying it? It's a hollow law, Clark."

"Yeah . . . " He seemed to be accepting my argument. I knew his only real doubts were about himself, and not really about what I was saying. Being the captain, he wanted to make sure he wasn't being influenced by friendship. If I'd had the time, I'd have respected that. "I just want the time to think for a few minutes."

"Well, think fast," I said, "because somebody around here is working against us. And I don't mean spreading rumors."

Clark moaned and mumbled, "Don't jump to conclusions."

I twisted around, pulling my leg out of Pocket's grip and messing up the bandaging process. Turning to face them all, I motioned Bonnie to leave my leg alone for now. "Conclusions? Let me give you some meat for conclusions. What happened to Donahue and Brand? How did they get killed by aliens if they were inside the ship's protection grid?"

"We found Donahue on the edge of the grid," MacCormac reminded. "I can't be sure he wasn't over the line."

"Or maybe he was killed inside the line and dumped at the edge, so you wouldn't be sure."

Clark parted his lips to argue, then paused and waited to hear me out.

"And when we found him," I went on, "there was no acid anywhere around him. Not on his uniform, not on the ground, his hands weren't burned . . . the tail spike that killed him would've been full of acid if he'd blown it off the animal himself. Maybe you haven't had the tour in here. Just a few steps away is a museum of alien parts, all cleaned out and mounted."

"Rory . . . " Clark murmured. "Tail spikes used as weapons? Come on . . . who'd think of that?"

"I just did. I wouldn't put it past a few blood relations to think of it too. Or passionate cultists. They thought of a few other creative things, like using those huts as incubation chambers. Can you imagine those poor people? Able to see out, watching each other's chests explode and the little larvae racing out, knowing what was coming to them? No wonder Diego's wife hanged herself before it happened."

Bonnie shuddered and let out a gush of sorrow. "Horrible . . ."

"What about Brand?" MacCormac asked. "You don't think they used those . . ."

"That maybe he was strangled by one of those parasites that was already dead?" I said. "Yeah, I might be enticed to entertain that idea, Colonel, since there were no scratches on his hands or face." I allowed a pause while they all traveled back in their minds to see that I was right about that. "There are a handful of us on the planet and the first ones to die are our Colonial Marines? Think about military tactics. The first advantages you want to take away from your enemy are his guards."

"Your mother, that little woman?" Clark wondered. "She overwhelmed three Marines?"

"Or Tad, or somebody in her thrall."

"You'd better make the direct charge," MacCormac said, "if you're going to. I need to know exactly what you're saying."

With a wince at the freshening pain in my leg, I fixed my gaze on him and gave him what he wanted.

"Monsters do exist," I told him. "But they're human."

# 10

Life goes on day by day in the universe, and every once in a millennium pauses for the truly surreal.

All the rest of us shrank back into the blind, unable to read the situation, knowing things were changing too fast to predict. Scientists want to be able to predict everything. It's their lives' work. They were uneasy, I could tell.

What made us even more uneasy was my mother's behavior. Not only was she Jocasta Malvaux, but she was "into" being Jocasta Malvaux, as if it were a title and not just an identity. She proved this to us in the most poetic illustration possible . . . she went out of the blind alone.

We huddled inside, watching through the projector curtain as she walked out farther and farther, as far as she could and still be seen. Being seen was important.

There were adult aliens all around us now, though they hadn't been tipped off to the location of the blind. Even my mother wasn't quite that enraptured yet, to give away our only hiding place.

"What's she doing?" Clark asked as we stood side by side, with Pocket and MacCormac. Around us were a few researchers—Paul,

the microbiologist, Chantal, the vet, Neil, the camp director, and Ethan, the crowd dynamics guy. Their presence made me wonder where the others were, and why they weren't here watching the "show."

It was nearly dark, but the big green-striped moon provided a conveniently bright glow across the landscape and we were able to make out everything. The moon was big, bigger than Earth's moon, or closer or something, so the glow was luminous and the shadows sharp.

I motioned Clark to silence, and we watched as my mother walked out to meet the aliens. Of those which were wandering by in seeming aimlessness—not like before, when they had moved in one direction with purpose—two noticed my mother. Then, a third.

"They've got her," MacCormac announced. I think he was warning me that my mother was very likely to die right now, before my eyes, in case I wanted to look away.

I didn't. In fact, I disgusted myself by wondering if that wouldn't make things a lot simpler for all of us. She was a lightning rod. Without her, the club would crumble. Would it help if the aliens took the struggle away?

My own mother . . . what was I thinking? What had I turned into?

My soul was saved by a strong desire to rush out there and drag her back. I was stopped by the fascinating sight as she raised her hands to them the way she might to beloved horses in a stable.

Morbid curiosity took over as the three aliens undulated closer to her. They were snakelike in their movements, never quite still, though not quite advancing. Even standing over her, touching her with their tail tips and moving their toothy jaws along her sides and upraised arm, they continually shifted and coiled, uncoiled and flexed. One by one they lowered their snouts into her palms as if she



were feeding them by hand. This was her dream, her quest, to walk among them.

I knew the other researchers were somewhere in the complex, eyes fixed to monitor screens, watching the prophecy come true. This could only make things worse. These people had to be evacuated before the spell was broken.

I bit my lip and shook my head. "I swear she's scarier than those things."

\* \* \*

I sat by myself in the museum chamber, mostly twitching and trying to think clearly. Sudden decisions could have tragic consequences and I had to make sure we were acting with good sense and not just acting. The hardest part would be figuring out who among the campers was working with us and who was working against us, whom we would have to drag, and who would happily run to the ship once they were freed from the spell of the Wicked Jocasta of the West.

The museum chamber seemed to be my favorite place, with its giant creature staring—or whatever it did—down at me. In here, I was able to look my enemy in the face, if not the eyes, and try to measure him up. And there wasn't usually anybody else in here, so the chance to be alone was a factor.

Which was why I flinched when somebody came into the chamber. I looked up and discovered the visitor was Carmichael, the boy Marine.

"Hello, sir. Sorry if I disturbed you."

He had a slight squeak in his voice, as if puberty weren't quite finished.

"Private," I greeted. "Resting up?"

"Patrol, sir. Interior."

"Guarding something from coming in here or us from going out?"

"Don't really know, sir." He sniffed and muttered, "Sure wish I did."

"You've been pretty quiet this whole mission."

"Not much to say, sir. Gonna have a lot of stories to tell, though, assuming I get back, that is. Wait till my folks hear about all this."

"Where are your parents?"

"Waukesha, Wisconsin."

"Hey, I'm from Milwaukee."

"That's what I heard, sir."

"Have a seat."

"I . . . I don't think I should."

"You deserve it." I patted the folding chair next to mine.

He sat down beside me, but kept his pulse rifle right against his chest.

"How old are you?" I asked.

"Twenty-two, sir."

"You can call me Rory. I'm not much into the 'sir' thing. What's your first name?"

He made a face. "Mike."

"Mike?"

"Yeah."

"Michael Carmichael?"

"Yeah . . ."

I rewarded him with a cranky laugh. "Mothers can be such turkeys."

"Yeah!"

"What would you rather have had?" I asked. "If you could choose your own name."

"I . . . I always . . . my grandfather's always been great to me. He was a war veteran, like. He's why I joined the Corps. I always admired him. He's got this real strong first name . . ."

"Go ahead."

"Aw, no. It's dumb."

"Nah, go ahead. What is it?"

"Kensington. Shit, I shouldn't have said it! Sounds so dumb . . ."

"Kensington Carmichael?"

"No—his name is O'Keefe. His last name."

"Kensington O'Keefe," I tested. "I like that. You're right, it's great sounding. Has a lot of character."

"Yeah, yeah, it sure does. Sure does."

I slapped my knees. "Well, let's just do it."

"Do what?"

"Change your name."

"Come on . . ."

"People do it all the time."

"No kidding? Just like that?"

"Yup. On your feet."

He bounded to his feet and twitched with anticipation, adjusting his uniform, and finally shouldered his weapon.

I stood up too and squared off in front of him. "Ready?"

He whipped his hat off. "Ready."

I looked around and picked up a drinking straw left behind on a desk, and tapped him on the shoulder. "I, Detective Rory Theodore Malvaux, Duke of Earl, do dub thee Private Kensington Carmichael, Colonial Marine Corps, Esquire."

Carmichael beamed and gasped, "Oh, man!"

We shook hands vigorously, enjoying the moment.

"Can I call you 'Ken'?" I asked.

His grin could've lit up Broadway. "Ken . . . Thanks!"

I offered a sort of goofy salute, and he responded.

"Better get on with your patrol," I said. "You're a whole new man now."

"Yeah, thanks!"

When he left, I didn't sit down again. Somehow the conversation with him had relaxed my brain and given me some focus. I knew what I had to do.

I went looking for my sister again. She was fanatical and devoted, but there had to be some line of communication that would work. We'd protected each other a lot when we were kids. She'd grown up knowing our mother wasn't exactly like the other girls' mothers, or anybody's for that matter, and I'd grown up knowing I didn't count for much. There had to be some of that lingering inside her hardened survivalist exterior. Right?

What the heck, I was desperate. Clinging to delusions actually helped somehow. Or at least maybe I would eliminate some dead ends.

The chambers were mostly darkened, lit only by tiny red lights that allowed us to move around without stumbling, but caused no glow or sharp shadows. Like a ship's bridge in red alert, we could function almost in the dark.

I passed by several people, hunched over screens, watching the delirious scene of my mother in communion with her subjects. Others muttered to each other and tried to distill the tons of new information they'd picked up. To me, it was one or two interesting episodes. To them, it was a flood of data. Scientists who looked at things in micro-slivers were pulling apart the fabric of our day and

trying to reassemble it into something they could sift for patterns. People who devoted their entire lives to translating one page of manuscript had stumbled upon a whole library.

The hideout was really an ant colony of pockets joined by tunnels. Until now, I'd only been in a few of the chambers, but now I toured quietly, by myself, deliberately not disturbing anyone else, whether they were working or trying to sleep. The darkness helped.

When I heard Gracie's voice in one of the lab chambers, I stayed in the tunnel without coming out into the chamber. She was talking to someone. This wasn't the voice of the shrill sycophant nor the gruff defender of science I'd heard earlier. This was much softer, more fearful, fraught with passion and urgency. I couldn't make out the words, but the emotions were there. I'd heard enough impassioned whispering in jail cells and interrogation rooms.

I peeked into the chamber, taking a chance. There they were—in silhouette against a bank of working screens that showed the activities of the day, aliens and huggers, replays of my adventures and Bonnie's, speed-takes of MacCormac and the Marines in action, like flashes of bad dreams. The pictures glowed behind the forms of my sister and the stealth guy, Tad, locked in an embrace and whispering to each other.

I tried to hear what they were saying. No good. They were too good at being quiet and still getting their messages across. They probably lived like this all the time, sneaking kisses, murmuring in corners, no privacy, no future.

What could I overhear, anyway? Lovers' promises?

I backed up into the tunnel, then made a big deal out of stomping my way into the chamber. When I unfolded myself and coughed to make sure they'd heard me, they were on two sides of the chamber,

with Gracie seated at the monitor bank. Tad did a poorer job of disguising their tryst.

"Hi," I said amiably. "Hope I didn't wake you."

"We're awake," Tad said coldly. He looked at Gracie. "I'm gonna go."

"Okay," she agreed.

"You want me to stay?" He looked at me, but he was talking to her.

She glanced at me. "No, I can handle him."

He would rather have stayed, but didn't. I gave him ten seconds to get way down the corridor and watched to make sure he wasn't lurking around as I had.

I tugged a bulk food crate up to the monitor bank and sat down on it. "Gracie, I need your help. No fireworks, okay?"

Her face was patched with moving lights from the screens, and she self-consciously checked the snaps on her shirt to make sure they were closed all the way to her collar. "Oh, I'll jump right up, then."

I tried to calm her by using a very even tone. "This isn't sibling rivalry. This is official business. I need your help getting these people off the planet. You can influence M'am."

"Think so?"

"You have to evacuate. Everybody. All we want is for you to evacuate without a fight."

"That's all," she lilted sarcastically. "Gosh, why didn't you say so? Until you showed up in that carnival wagon, with all your calliopes chiming, we were successfully hiding and observing a hive of Xenos in their natural environment—"

"Cut the toe-dancing," I said more sharply. "This isn't their natural environment. They came here as aliens, same as us. They're on a slaughter mission, same as us. Has anybody studied them? Did

you do autopsies? Analyses? Did any of you try to figure out how to fight them?"

"We don't want to fight them. We want to live with them."

"That only works if they agree. They're closing in. You're all doomed if you stay. That means I can't allow you to stay."

"We've been successfully hidden for months. They didn't know we were here until you—"

"They knew you were here all along. They've spent those months closing the noose. Haven't you looked at Ethan's crowd control data?"

"They don't know to close any nooses. You're making that up." She hunched her shoulders and tapped at her keyboard, communicating that the work was far more important than anything I had to say. "You're just uncomfortable because you're not the top of the food chain anymore. You think they're ugly because they're a different kind of parasite than humans are. If we can grow beyond our parasitic ways, who's to say another species can't grow beyond theirs? They're beautiful animals and they're here living their lives, unless we gum it all up for them. You and your genocidal robots—"

"Why is it any animal, all the time? Why don't humans ever come first?"

"Because they don't deserve to."

"'They'? What are you, a corn flake? You never give Human-ity credit for doing anything good."

"Oh, like what?"

Bless me, I actually had the answer. "Like cherishing culture while embracing change."

"Oh, sure, we embrace a lot," she spat, rewarding me with a cold glower. "What have we got to show for ourselves in the galaxy?"

We've wiped out entire cultures of our own kind, killed ancient languages—Gaelic, Sanskrit, Assyrian—”

“Or,” I punctuated, “maybe they just played themselves out and weren't needed anymore. Did you ever think of that? Maybe the unification of language is the great victory of cultural Oneness you always wish for. Or you say you do. You hate when it really happens. Maybe the fading away of ancient cultures means we're finally getting together. People are always sentimental about the wrong things!”

“Don't yell. Hold your voice down. You never had any self-control.” She went back to poking at the keyboard and adjusting the screen, which showed several windows of data that could've been critical or could've been nonsense. No idea which.

I had to admit she was right about that. If I'd had any self-control, I'd have turned down this mission in favor of an enforcement officer who could be dispassionate about my mother, my sister, and the dubious sides of their work.

“I came here to get as far from Humanity as I could,” she continued, almost musing. “Humanity is the only species that wipes out other species.”

“Gracie, that's eco-head crap.” I was even quieter this time. “How jaded can you get? You sound like M'am on meth. Species have been getting wiped out for millions of years without Humanity's help. It's the natural cycle. Thousands of species lived for eons and died natural deaths before Humanity ever appeared. Who can say that's not a success?”

“I can say it.”

“And I say keeping them going artificially is a travesty. It can't be done. You can only keep that sort of thing going for so long. Remember the Chinese panda? The millions of dollars poured into



the futile effort to save them? Never was there a species more determined to go extinct. They couldn't breed, they only ate one thing—"

"Why don't you write an article or go on a concert tour?"

"You can waste your life protecting a tree, but eventually it'll die its own death in its own time and you can't stop it. And you shouldn't. Maybe our being here, Clark with his payload, maybe we are the natural chain of events playing out. Maybe we're the hand of nature this time. Have you ever thought of that?"

"You're not the hand of nature, Rory. You're just another passionate murderer." She twisted in her chair to face me and leaned forward to make her point. "We know what you did, you know. M'am and I. We know how you did it. Mr. Law Enforcement, Mr. Detective, Mr. Defender of the People. When push came to shove, you abandoned the law. You cut that man's arms off and let his life bleed out. No trial, no due process, you just took the law into your hands and carried out a sentence. And wasn't it brutal, too. Wasn't it ugly and cruel. Wasn't it savage. You're the real monster. Not them. Not us."

How far could I get with this barricade between us? She was bitter and angry on a deep level, deeper than the things she was saying. This fury went back to our childhoods.

Determined to keep the issue in the moment, I shifted gears—a little. "Okay, I'm a monster. As long as we're monster-building here, maybe you can tell me what happened to Rusty's stealth suit."

Her eyes narrowed and her brows came down. She paused. "What about his suit?"

"It stopped working at a critical moment. Right when the alien was standing in front of him, it stopped masking. That's interesting timing, to me."

“Of course it is, yeah, malfunctions never just ‘happen’ in Rory Malvaux’s world of order. We’ve had lots of them here in the real world.”

I hesitated. “How many?”

She retreated from that line of questioning. “Some.”

I watched her for a moment, trying to get something out of that odd expression. “M’am ordered a fresh power pack just before he went out. The suit ran out of power. Take the blinders off, Gracie. She doesn’t care about anybody around here. Don’t you notice that with her it’s always ‘I’ am doing this, ‘I’ will be recognized? When’s the last time she used the word ‘we’ or talked about ‘our’ work? She doesn’t even know you or these other disciples are here except to provide her with information and do the dishes. She’ll go back to Earth some day and take credit for all—”

“And she’ll deserve it!” The passion in my sister’s expression almost knocked me off my crate. She poked me in the chest with a finger that I’m pretty sure she’d rather were a dagger. “Our mother is the Dian Fossey, the Jane Goodall, the Charles Darwin of this age. You don’t see it because you’ve always resented her. You’ve spent your whole life avoiding things that make demands or warrant loyalty.”

“Loyalty is for people who think of others first.” My voice grew rough, and I forced myself to hold it down. I had to find something that would work on her, appeal to her common sense, if she had any left. I knew she did. Gracie’s common sense was always fighting with her idealism—she’d always been like that. I just had to tap it. “Do you actually believe that if you just learn enough, you can actually live among them? Live real lives? Have families? Grow? Do anything other than hide or die?”

We fell silent for a moment, just glaring at each other. I was sorry I'd tipped my hand about Rusty's suit. I'd hoped to release that information with a little more finesse. Now I'd lost that trump card.

Gracie's face was flushed and hot, shiny with perspiration in the red glow of the night lights. She looked overworked, exhausted, deeply stressed, and ready to fall apart, yet somehow was holding herself together and fighting for stability. She didn't have our mother's coolness. She's never had it.

"She's walking among them," my sister vowed. "You were wrong and she was right."

"Okay, she might be right," I accepted. "I don't know. I'm not a scientist. But I can tell you other things that might happen. Some day, tomorrow or fifty or a hundred years from now, some innocent ship from some innocent race will land here, not knowing what's waiting for them. The cosmic hitchhikers will take advantage of that and find their way to space again. Maybe to Earth. Maybe to some other innocent civilization. Then those things will start killing again. You want an image of genocide? Try that one. These aliens are acting differently from anything anybody seems to know about them. I think you should tell me right now the full scope of the pile we've stepped in."

The bald demand disarmed her. She had no pre-recorded sarcastic response this time.

I don't know which part got to her. I felt as if I'd spilled my pebbles to have told her about the suit. Had I shocked her?

Then, something worse occurred to me. Because she didn't look so shocked.

I flashed on Pocket's face during our last card game— which he won, as usual. *"No poker face at all, Malvaux, my man. Hand it over and let's go again."*

"Please leave me alone," my sister requested. She seemed weakened and wasted. Was she thinking about her own future, about possibly someday having a life, kids, a home, maybe with Tad?

Was she thinking there was no future for her?

"Okay," I said miserably.

Should I slap the cuffs on now or later?

After pushing the food crate back where I'd found it, I left her alone in her cubicle to pretend to keep working.

Played out and empty, I slunk back through the tunnel, moving more slowly than necessary, trying to think. With all the weird activity outside, even Pocket couldn't run odds on whether any of us would survive. The scientists were clearly befuddled, and when experts are befuddled, the rest of us are just plain lost.

I was lost. Clumsy. I'd blown my one advantage, and now didn't even know whether I was on the right track. My instincts were all clogged up. Sentiment and memories were clouding my brain. Was I ever the wrong man for this job.

The next chamber was the place where Chantal had taken me to see her "collection." There, I stopped.

Before me, the stuffed Xenomorph stood in elegant repose, positioned for the edification of human eyes, its outer teeth held open to emit the distended inner jaws. It would probably stand there forever, or until this fortress were breached. Its own kind would find it someday, perhaps soon, and circle it in a confusion of wonder. Would they pick at it and feel its cables and armor, sniff and poke it the way elephants did to the bones of their own dead? Would they try to make it move and come back to life? Or would they know somehow that it was a trophy?

How intelligent were they . . . really?

"It's beautiful in its way."

I spun around and almost knocked into the creature. "Bonnie!"

Bonnie sat on the foam floor with her legs folded, tucked back into a nook. She clapped her hand to her lips. "Oh! I scared you!"

"Scared me?" My own hand was on my chest, nursing the coronary. "Just a mild infarction."

With a guilty smile she said, "I guess this isn't the place where you should surprise anybody."

"What are you doing in here?"

"Just thinking."

"With this thing?" I gestured at the big alien.

"It's amazing to be able to just look at one."

I sat down next to her and stretched my legs out, leaning back against the pressed-plastic wall. "According to my mother, you can just go outside and introduce yourself."

"No thanks!" Despite sitting quietly and seeming in control, she picked at her fingernails.

"Any luck with your sister?"

I sighed demonstratively. "Total titanium wall. The second generation is always worse than the first."

She didn't seem to like the way I talked about my family.

"Sorry," I offered. "I know this pops the Jocasta bubble for you. Every silver lining has a cloud, y'know."

"That's not very nice to say," she scolded mildly. "She *is* your mother. Hasn't she ever given you anything worth valuing?"

"Like what? Life? Yeah, she gave me that. I was a . . . mistake."

"Mistake? You mean she didn't want to get pregnant?"

"Oh, yes, she wanted to. She was trying to have a girl. I was in-vitro. They thought I was a girl, but somebody screwed up in the lab."

"Oh, Rory . . . that can't be true."

I shrugged. "It's okay, I accepted it a long time ago. She never hid it from me."

"Sounds like the kind of thing you'd *want* to hide from your child." Her empathy was charming.

"It can't be hidden in my family," I explained. "All the wealth in my family comes down through the women. Our great-great grandmother had one daughter, our great-grandmother had two daughters, each of those had two daughters, and my mother, quite unintentionally, had a son. She never wanted any kids, but the family fortune had to be protected. She takes her obligations seriously. When I was born, she took one look and decided to try again as soon as she could. She had to have a daughter to leave the kingdom to. The queendom, really."

Bonnie's face took on all the pain I'd avoided about this issue. I didn't like making her feel so bad, when I really didn't.

"Are you sure you're not reading this through a jaundiced eye?" she asked. "You're diminishing your personhood so much!"

"No, not really. We're more than how we're conceived."

She paused and thought back over what she'd just heard. "You mean, out of your mother's incredible fortune and all her investments and holdings, you don't . . ."

"Right. I don't get anything. Gracie gets it all. That's why I can never get married."

"Why can't you marry?"

"Because the wife gets my inheritance. Womanhood trumps everything. I would never know for sure why anybody was marrying me. Technically, she could stay married to me for a year, ditch me, and keep the fortune. There's no protection against that in

our inheritance. No pre-nuptuals, no nothing. It's some kind of bastardized protectionism for women as a 'species.'"

Bonnie's eyes widened with amazement at the concept. "My goodness, that sounds . . ."

"Warped. I know. You'd have to know the women in my family. They're kinda sick in the head."

"Rory, I'm so sorry . . ."

"It's okay. Right now I wish it were all that's twisted between my sister and me."

"You mean, that 'second generation' thing?"

I nodded. "Lenin was bad. Stalin was worse. . . . Alexander the Great stood on the empire created by Philip of Macedon and really pushed too far. The French botched their own revolution and Napoleon was there to take advantage."

She tipped her head into my periphery. "What are you really talking about, really?"

I didn't want to voice my suspicions. They'd hardly had a chance to simmer. Bonnie's sensitivity prodded me gently to think out loud, and somehow it was helping.

"My mother's obsessions have always been out in front," I said. "She's never thought she was wrong, so she never had to sneak around. As for Gracie . . . she can be heartless and single-minded. She takes seriously her role as the custodian of greatness, never believing she could ever be great herself. My mother always insisted on being the great one, and Gracie's always bought into that. Nobody's more ferocious than a child defending a parent."

"You mean a parent defending a child."

"No . . . I mean a child defending a parent. I've seen it before in my line of work. Horribly abused children will clam up and refuse to indict their own parents, and sometimes even defend the parents'

actions. It's one of the little ways humans are different from other animals. The blindest of devotion. Gracie has it."

Bonnie was a simple person, definitely a lot smarter than she let on, or than she believed. I could tell she got the message I was trying hard not to say outright.

"Are you telling me," she attempted, "you think your sister has been . . . doing something wrong?"

I nodded. "I was so focused on my mother, so wrapped up in my own resentments, that I quit thinking like an investigator and just believed what I wanted to believe. I think I might be completely off track. Rusty's power pack— my mother ordered it replaced just before we went out, but it was Gracie who replaced it. My mother could never overpower Marines the way Donahue and Brand were overpowered, but I just saw Gracie and Tad romancing it up. Gracie has a man at her beck and call. A man devoted to the compound. A stealth expert."

She shivered. "Oh, my goodness—this is terrible . . . what are you going to do? Can you . . . arrest them?"

"I actually can. On suspicion. How about that? A bazillion miles from Earth, and I actually have jurisdiction. Can you believe it?" I reached into my pocket and pulled out my shield. "See? Badge and everything."

"My goodness . . . when will you make your decision?"

"I don't know, exactly. Is she really a murderer? If so, I have to act before anybody else gets killed. Somebody's doing the killing, I know that. Some human. Usually I just bring 'em in and the system takes over. I have backup."

"You have the captain. And the Marines." She smiled. "And me."

I looked at her. "I love having you for my backup."

"Even if it's just to bandage your leg?"



“Especially for that. Imagine how distracted I’d be, hobbling around with an infected leg!”

Again she laughed a little, nervously, in her cute schoolgirl way. “I can definitely stop that from happening. I can even stop the scar.”

“Hey, I kinda like having the scar. Makes me surly. Gorilla-like. Attractive to ladies of ill-repute.”

She blushed and wiggled her shoulders. Tonight she seemed a lot less boyish than she always had before, despite her not-particularly-petite build and her goofy manners and the fact that she didn’t seem to understand how smart she was. Despite the fact that she was on the fast track to becoming a doctor—a no-dummies-allowed profession—she wasn’t quite aware of her own value. Actually, I found her shyness endearing.

I nudged her shoulder with mine. “So how’s your reputation?”

She laughed again, brightening the dim room and my spirits. Her blushing cheeks glowed and her smile flickered in the red light. She covered her mouth coquettishly—and she was really lousy at being coquettish—but I knew she was covering because the red light made us both look as if we’d just eaten a crate of tomatoes. Not exactly dinner in candlelight.

I wished I could give her that. Treat her like a girl for once. We hadn’t treated her much like a girl on the ship. Maybe that was why she needed little animals around.

Logging away that I owed her a nice evening out, I asked, “What time is it?”

“Almost midnight.”

“Did my mother ever come in?”

“She did. It was amazing, seeing her out there, with them . . .”

“I couldn’t look after a while,” I admitted. “Is anybody still scanning outside?”

“They’ve been scanning all night. Here. I’ll show you.”

She picked up a remote and clicked it. A bank of screens, six of them, flickered to life above the head of the stuffed alien. The creature suddenly looked as if it were appearing on stage.

“Wow—I didn’t even see those up there,” I commented.

“Well, the room has its distractions.”

“Sure as hell does.”

We settled back to watch the pictures of the landscape. Dreamy pictures of aliens moving around . . . just moving, squabbling amongst themselves, stalking the universe in their way . . . and other scenes where other kinds of animals sniffed and lurked. I hadn’t been able to pay much attention to the panoply of other life on the planet. For Bonnie’s sake, I wished we could just take a walk out there, maybe get a pair of binoculars and go critter watching. I thought she would like that, and deserved it. Instead we were the animals, trapped in our hole.

There had to be a way to get out, to entice the researchers to escort us back to the ship, and then to actually get on. That would be the ugly scene—forcing them to comply. And dangerous too. Those moments would be crucial and leave us vulnerable. They had to be planned, with Clark, with the Marines, and if possible with Theo back aboard the ship. If I’d done my job better, I’d have a clearer idea of just who would work with us when push came to shove, and who was too devoted to my mother to do anything but fight us. Gracie and Tad were definitely over there in the fight camp. How would Neil react? Diego, who’d lost his wife and unborn child? Zaviero? Couldn’t exactly muscle him around, could we? I’d feel bad doing it too. What else—take the time to explain to him what we were trying to accomplish?

Beside me, Bonnie rubbed her arms and shivered. "They keep it cold in here, don't they?"

"Something about not expelling heat signatures. They've developed some fancy ways to hide. Most of them as combat basic, though, if I read it right. Most of hiding is what you *don't* do, not what you do. Keeping quiet, not moving around much, not expelling heat or gas, odor, that kind of thing. They've taken it to other levels, though, with holographics and these smart suits and all."

"You have to give them credit, don't you?"

"Oh, I do. It's the motivations that worry me, not the tactics."

I leaned back against a stack of drums and put my head back, closed my eyes for a moment. My exhausted brain started swimming and seeing colors in spite of my eyes' being closed.

"You're tired," Bonnie mentioned. "How about getting a nap?"

"Is that an offer?" I opened my eyes and poked her in the side. "Hmm? Cinderella?"

She giggled. "Cinderella . . . what's that mean?"

"I don't know. You look different in this light. Kinda . . . sporty."

Palming her unruly blond hair, she tried to finger it back. "Every girl's dream to look 'sporty' to a guy."

I smiled and pulled a few strands back where it had been before. "Don't change your hair. I like it. It's honest."

"Honest hair . . ."

"Oh—God, I'm stupid!" I thumped myself in the head. "You said, 'It's cold,' and like an idiot I actually commented on why! That's not the right reaction!"

"Huh?"

"What a fool, what a goof! I couldn't get a message if the bottle hit me over the head! Here's the *right* reaction."

I raised my arm and tucked her under it, pulling her close and rubbing her arm and shoulder to make her warm.

“See? That’s the right—”

A movement on one of the screens caught my eye. Something about it was different from the movements of the aliens or the other creatures moving slowly in the photographable distance.

On the second screen from the left, there was a picture of the area just outside this blind, the place where I’d hidden under the slab, where the aliens had lumbered past me and I first saw them in person. In that area was a broken glass pillar, with craggy remains sticking up as if a tree had been cracked by lightning. And from one of those crags there now hung a flapping creature whose movements I recognized. Black leathery wings, twitchy flitting motions, finally settling down to an elongated upside-down triangle. Even on the grainy screen, I could make out two black eyes looking toward the camera.

I shoved Bonnie aside and scrambled to my feet. “Holy God!”

Bonnie jumped up. “What? What’s wrong?”

But I was already gone, running down the corridor toward the main chamber.

“Clark!” I shouted, forgetting all about keeping my voice down. My shout boomed in the otherwise quiet compound.

A half-dozen people flinched and jumped up, shaken, including Clark, who had found a moment to doze off.

“Huh! What?” he gasped. “What’s wrong?”

“Get up! The ship’s been breached!”

# 11

“Look!”

I stepped over Pocket, who was asleep on the floor, and tapped the controls on the panel which I had previously seen my mother use to turn on the projectors in the stealth curtain.

As the crowd increased around me, everyone reacting to my trumpeting, the projector curtain also woke up and gave us a picture of the landscape on its other side. There, hanging on the glass spire, blinking her eyes at us, was Buttercup the fox bat.

“Oh! Buttercup!” Bonnie blurted, and stepped past me toward the curtain.

“Don’t go out there!” I seized her by the shoulders which I had hugged gently only moments ago, and dragged her back.

“The ship!” Clark pushed Pocket and me out of his way and crashed through to the main bank of monitor screens.

Everybody followed him, and in this moment my mother appeared.

“What’s this noise?” she asked.

“The ship’s been breached,” I said, pointing at the screen that showed the right angle. “The ramp is down!”

"I see," she responded. "More mistakes?"

We crowded to the monitor bank and Clark leaned close to the three screens which showed parts of the *Vinza*, parked at its landing site. Sure enough, the ship's ramp was down. At the bottom of the ramp were four Xenomorphs, dead or dying. And moving down the ramp on frighteningly proficient segmented legs, were five metallic-hooded shapes.

"The poison-packers! Shit me blind!" Clark gulped. "Some-body activated them! What the hell! What the hell!" He jumped up. "I have to contact the ship!"

"You must not, Captain," my mother said bluntly. "Any disturbance in wave use could trigger another behavioral change. We simply do not know enough yet."

Colonel MacCormac made a noise of contempt and growled, "Well, that's that. Squad!"

I spun around to him. "Are you going out?"

"That's right."

"You know those robotics will target you as well as the aliens—"

"That's why we're going out. We have to neutralize them before they find their way in here. You don't give up your only bivouac. Captain, how can we neutralize them? Do you know?"

"Theo was the only one who could've activated them!" Clark exclaimed, shaken. "Him and me—we're it! He must've had a reason!"

"I think the reason is clear." MacCormac pointed at the screen. "The aliens got inside the grid and somehow inside the ship, and your first mate didn't know how else to fight them."

"How could they get inside the grid?"

"Don't care."

"Yeah, but I care." I couldn't help an all-too-human glance at my sister and Tad. Tad caught the glare and returned it with a twist of his mouth. Not a good sign, as body language goes, but a helpful one.

"What are those helmets made of?" MacCormac asked.

"Quadra-fold TGX," Clark said.

MacCormac turned to Carmichael and Edney. "Grenades only. Load up. Take sidearms in case the bugs give us trouble."

"You want an extra hand?" I offered. Was I crazy or just stupid?

"No," he said sharply. "Everybody else stays inside. I don't want to have to worry about anybody but my own squad. This is now a military operation. Is that perfectly clear?"

Heads bobbed like daisies all around.

While he and the other two Marines loaded up with grenades and sidearms—down to two, stoic, brave, silent— MacCormac turned to Clark. "How many do you think there are, Captain?"

Clark was deeply disturbed, frustrated that he had to be here. "A hundred to a container, five pallets, twenty to a pallet. They have to be activated in bulk, a pallet at a time, so the least you'll face is twenty. Look, it's my ship—I want to go with you. My crew—"

"Out of the question. We'll see to your crew." MacCormac slung a whole belt full of grenades over his shoulder. "If there are any left."

"Don't let them see you first," Clark warned. "The darts are hypersonic."

"Understood."

The Marines moved out, leaving the rest of us feeling as if we were baby birds left in the nest. The flurry they caused at the projector curtail startled the fox bat, and she spread her huge wings and flew off over our heads.

"Oh, no!" Bonnie cried. "Buttercup!"

"Stay here, stay here," I ordered, holding her by the arm so tightly that she winced. "Pocket, where are you?"

"Here." He stepped between Tad and the chef, Oliver.

"All right, how could that have happened? How could the ship's security blaster be turned off?"

"You mean, other than we turn it off inside?"

"Obviously!"

He paused to think. "Maybe a targeted frequency pulse. But that's a fancy procedure. The frequency would have to be diagnosed first, then rolled down to a tight beam."

"Like stealth technology?" I faced Tad in full accusatory mode.

"Somebody did this on purpose to make sure we didn't launch tomorrow. It fits."

"Back off, man," Tad fumed.

Clark grimaced and shook his head. "I hate that it fits."

"You're paranoid!" Gracie accused. "You're trying to turn us against each other!"

"Graciella, remain calm," our mother instructed, leading by example. "From their point of view, I understand."

I rubbed my face, feeling the fatigue race through my fingers into my eyes at her smooth performance. "Uh, cripes . . . All right, everybody quiet down and don't move around. Those robots are programmed to kill anything that's not native DNA to the planet, and that means us. Let the Colonel do his job and don't attract any attention."

"Aren't you afraid we'll escape?" my mother snidely said, letting out more emotion, I'm sure, than she intended.

"You want to escape?" I spread my hands and gestured toward the outside world. "Go ahead. Go on out there. Make my job a hell of a lot easier."



The uneasy crowd dissipated into groups of two or three, but nobody was talking much. We now had two kinds of creatures on this planet gunning for us, and I knew that was because the *Vinza* had come here loaded for bear. Now what?

"Please," Bonnie spoke up, "let me go out and get Buttercup! She's so lost out there . . . she's all by herself. She's just out the door!"

"Have you looked outside?" I chided. "There's a jungle. She'll fit right in."

"She was raised by humans! She's looking for us! All I have to do is put out my —"

"Bonnie, forget it," I snapped. "I think you're smart. Don't prove me wrong."

"But what if those things catch her?"

"She can fly. They can't. She'll be okay."

"I can get her to come to me. I'll use some of that dried fruit—"

"No! Just . . . no."

Bonnie broke down into a spate of angry sobbing, during which I realized I was being unfair to her.

I coiled my arm around her. "Sorry . . . okay, okay . . . I'm sorry. Look, Bonnie, she's probably a lot better off out there than we are. There are a zillion insects, according to Zaviero, and lots of fruit or whatever she eats. She'll live."

"We can't just abandon her," she moaned. "You'll help me, won't you?"

"Me? Honey, I'm not going out there again for anything. Nothing and nobody. I'm done. Anybody who goes out is crazy."

"Oh, please . . ."

"The only thing that'll get me outside again is to go back to the *Vinza* and launch off this sin of planet. We'll go first thing in the

morning, all of us, whether these idiots know it or not.”

“And just leave her on this planet by herself?”

“She’s a *bat*.”

Tears broke out again.

What was the big deal? It wasn’t as if we were leaving a child out there. Or even an Irish setter.

A bat, for pity’s sake.

“Hey, look at this!” Pocket called. He drew our attention to one of the screens, on which we could see a poison-packer moving on two of its six legs down a gully ridge.

We crowded around the screen, desperately wishing we could see the events unfold in person, knowing that we’d be dead if we did. The poison-packers had no genetic imperatives or behavioral changes. They just hunted relentlessly any life form not native to this planet. There would be no walking among them.

“Look at how it walks,” Pocket appreciated.

“They have six legs,” Clark said, “for any kind of terrain. If they lose one, they just use the others and keep going. You can’t outrun them. All you can do is hope they don’t catch you on their senses. They’re programmed to examine every inch of the planet. If our first wave is successful, the plan is to deploy another ten million of them from subsequent ships.”

We watched, unable to participate, as the poison-packer’s supertechnical helmet glowed with special sensors and dart ports. An adult alien was approaching it with a strange innocent curiosity. The aliens didn’t care about machines, didn’t know about them—at least, we assumed they didn’t.

On sight, the poison-packer zeroed in on the alien and fired one of its darts. We never even saw the dart, it happened so quickly. The alien jolted physically, let out a bawling howl, and clawed at its

ribcage, where the dart had struck it dead-center. The poison-packer simply trundled on past the alien and went on its way, seeking the next one.

The alien began to claw at its body. It wagged its huge head, then tipped its head sideways and bit furiously at its right arm, tearing ligaments and cables, chewing furiously, and then the left arm. It stomped its legs, finally dropping to the ground and snapping its second set of jaws at its thighs. As the DNA-specific poison coursed through its body, the alien was helping to rip itself to shreds. The long clawed hands tore at its open wounds, opening them further, spurting acid all over itself and over the ground, creating a sizzling, smoldering puddle for the creature to die in.

Within seconds, the process was finished. The alien lay twitching and sizzling in its own remains.

"Genocide," my mother commentated. "Who thinks of such things?"

Drained and overwhelmed, Clark turned to her and spoke in an honest way. "Mrs. Malvaux, I'm just the delivery man. This picture is way bigger than any of us."

"Lies," she accused. "You believe what you're doing is right. You shouldn't be here. You're destroying, and they're fighting back, and you and my son have the temerity to be angry about it. What's happening here is natural and we have no right to interfere."

"If we don't interfere," I argued, "we're all dead and I'm not ready for that. This is not an endangered species."

Her eyes drilled into mine. "But you mean to endanger it."

I nodded in annoyance. "Well, you've got me there!"

"Yes, I have you," she caustically agreed. "They have a natural controlling factor. We're witnessing it. There are no evil species. Nature doesn't create destruction."

"Nature creates almost nothing *but* destruction," I disclaimed.

That was when we heard the sound of more grenades, distant muffled booms rumbling along the landscape.

"Nobody goes out," I said. "We'll wait for the Marines."

\* \* \*

I felt dangerously alone. I'd much rather have actually *been* alone. Instead I sat here and stewed, watching the monitors and trying to figure out how to get everybody back to the ship and fly off this rock without losing anybody else.

This wasn't my best thing. Clark was theoretically the one who should be calling the shots, but he was, as he admitted, a freighter captain and not an adventurer, not a soldier, untrained in this kind of maneuver. Colonel MacCormac was probably the best one to make decisions, but I didn't want to say that kind of thing out in the open, because he could so easily become a target. Somebody was working against us, and as an investigator I was supposed to be able to tease out that identity. Most investigations took weeks, months, maybe years. I had minutes.

As I sat alone, the bank of screens had turned strangely calm. The calm was worse than action, I think. My legs quaked and wouldn't settle down. I was a bag of nerves.

One of the screens showed the flume between us and the camp of huts. That was a dangerous road now. It had probably seen more traffic in the past twelve hours than it had . . . well, ever. Parasites flicked around, full-sized aliens trod the area. Being out there was like wading a swamp in the Amazon—no telling what manner of horror would leap up and snap you down to your death. Nature could sure be creative in a bad way.

I squinted my tired eyes. There, hanging on a drape of gauze between two skinny spires, was the bat.

There it was, with its big soggy eyes and its Chihuahua face, hanging out on the gauze.

“What are you doing, Buttercup?” I murmured. “Why don’t you fly away while you can?”

The bat flexed one wing as if it had heard my thoughts, then coiled the wing back around itself like the cape in the old Dracula movies, and just waited there.

What was it waiting for? For us to come and get it?

“Is that it?” I asked the caped image on the screen. “All the way out here in space, you know somehow which group is yours? You know you’re an Earthling?”

My head pounded with exhaustion. I leaned back and rested it on the stark black wall. No chance for sleep.

The bat rearranged its feet and continued looking at me. Somehow it was even looking in the right direction, toward the camera, and thus we were eye to eye. She was. Bonnie said the bat was a girl.

I wondered if there were girl aliens and boy aliens.

\* \* \*

We paused for a moment of silence as we processed the information and what we thought was a pretty good theory about the things we’d seen. During that pause I found myself looking at Chantal, the pixie-ish veterinarian, which made me think of something else. I looked around the table, then past it to the tunnel opening,

“What’s wrong with you?” Pocket asked.

I scanned the group again, just to be sure. “Where’s Bonnie?”

They glanced around, just realizing she wasn’t here.

Clark darkly confirmed, "I haven't seen her . . . "

I reached for the control panel as I'd seen the researchers do when they wanted to speak to each other inside the blind's tunnel system. We weren't really supposed to use it, but I didn't care. "Bonnie? Bonnie, where are you? Are you in the compound? Wake up and talk if you're in here. Bonnie, come in, Bonnie, Bonnie."

The mellow communications system, on a constant low-volume, made my voice seem soft and distant.

There was no answer.

Then it dawned on me *why* there was no answer.

"Oh, crap . . . " I scratched past the table and the people on the bench and ducked into the area with the stacked video monitors and scanned them. I missed a lot the first time over, and then saw the terrible sight I knew was out there. On the bottom left screen, almost behind a stack of foam coffee cups, was Bonnie. She was lurking between two pillars, and in her hand she held two lumps of dried fruit.

"What the hell's she doing?" Clark demanded.

"Trolling for bats!" I burst past him. "I'll get her! Everybody stay here!"

I ran out into the forest of glass. I hoped I was going in the direction where I'd seen the fox bat lingering. If the monitors showed a circular area around the blind, and the bat had been on the monitor to the left, I reasoned that I had to go left.

Only when I got outside and discovered that looking at the land on the monitors and looking at the actual land were two completely different things. Getting my bearings took too long, and I still wasn't sure.

"Bonnie!" I dared to yell. My own voice startled me—we'd tried so hard to remain quiet that speaking up was a shock.

I ran around the rocky terrain which seemed to be the house for the caves in which my mother and her people had built their anthill. From here I could see that it wasn't a solid lump of rock with caves inside—it also had dozens of openings that clearly showed on the outside. The rock was Swiss cheese, offering only the basic of scaffolds for the blind. The walls and tunnel material of the blind were the only real separation between those inside and the outside world.

The land was still pocked with shadows and the moon, now having arched almost all the way across the sky, still shone fairly brightly, enough that I could navigate.

But I'd lost my way. This wasn't looking like the place where the bat had been. There was no hanging gauze here. Where was I supposed to go? Where would Bonnie have gone to reclaim her pet?

"Bonnie!" I called again—and skidded to a clumsy stop.

I'd run into an open plain, almost a meadow, of black and white spiky growth no taller than ten inches, and now I stood like a single turkey at a shoot. Flanking the entire northern ridge of the meadow were aliens. Hundreds of them. They turned in a single file and looked at me, heads bobbing and claws fanned. Their lips peeled back—greenish lips with phosphorescent drooling liquid running in strings to the ground.

"Aw, thank you, providence," I murmured. There was no hiding. They all saw me.

I thought I was dead. Except that they didn't move on me. Standing out here alone in the moonlight, looking at them, them looking at me, I felt like the lone conductor of a really big orchestra. With one flick of the baton, I could destroy the perfect pause.

"Rory?"

The voice came from my right. I pivoted only enough to see Bonnie sitting in the black and white furze, as if she were sitting at a campfire.

Moving in slow sidesteps, I closed the gap between us. "What are you doing?"

"I followed Buttercup," Bonnie said, trembling violently. "I didn't see them till I was all the way here."

"Neither did I." Extending my hand, I said, "Stand up *very* slowly and get behind me."

She unfolded her legs and took my hand. I pulled her to her feet.

"Getting behind won't matter." She raised her trembling hand and pointed over her shoulder.

Behind us, less than a hundred yards away, was the other edge of the meadow. To our right and extending the width of the available space, was a squall line of aliens. They flexed and threatened, hissed, rolled, and stalked with a physical message of singular purpose.

And they were moving toward us.

With awful deliberation the two lines were closing on each other. Because of the angle of the land, they'd meet first in the place where we'd come from—our escape route back to the blind.

"We're cut off," I said unhappily.

"Why are they divided up this way?" Bonnie squeaked, her voice barely working.

I drew her close against me and began to move laterally across the meadow.

That's when I saw the Marines. The three of them stood enraptured by the sight of the two lines of aliens closing like pincers on the body of the meadow.

There was no sign of anyone but the three Marines. Had they made it to the ship? Was everybody at the ship dead?



MacCormac had his sidearm raised. As we approached the Marines and they came into the meadow to meet us, I called, "MacCormac, don't . . . shoot."

"Say that again?"

We finally came together two-thirds of the way across the meadow.

"Don't antagonize them," I said. "They're leaving us alone. Don't trigger any other kind of behavior."

Not being an idiot, he did as I instructed and waved his two Marines to hold fire. Never thought the day would come when I'd be giving tactical instructions to a Colonel in the Colonial Marines.

"What happened at the ship?" I asked. "Is everybody dead?"

"No, they're in the hold, locked up," the colonel said quickly. "Your first mate left a com link on the ground outside, with a code to talk directly to him in the hold. We destroyed six of the PPs with grenades to get to the link. Aliens got aboard somehow, and Theo didn't know what to do except release a pallet of PPs. He threw the com link out the ramp, hoping we'd find it. We couldn't get in. There were still PPs in the cargo area."

"It's the 'somehow' that bothers me," I grumbled.

We hunkered together, trapped, as the astonishing tableau unrolled around us. From the south came the longer phalanx of the dogs of Anubis. They bobbed the curves of their hammer-shaped heads, holding their faces low to show the curved transparent shells of their skulls in some kind of species-specific signal. Distending their main jaws, they expelled and flexed their second sets, glistening with silvery saliva and sticky drainage. All in all, they were a disgusting display.

"We're cut off," I croaked.

MacCormac crouched on the other side of Bonnie, with Carmichael and Edney huddled at my side. "We could try flanking them," the Colonel said. "Lay down suppressing fire—"

"Too many," I told him. "No chance."

"I'm going down shooting!" Corporal Edney swore, and caressed her pistol, which seemed very small right now.

"There are other ways to fight," I told her. "Like not drawing attention to yourself."

"He's right," MacCormac said. "Make a circle around these civilians and hold fire!"

The three brave Marines, taking their roles seriously, arranged themselves flat to the ground around Bonnie and me. Then came the terrible moments of watching without being able to do anything else. The aliens moved in two concentrated waves toward each other, bundling into tighter units as they closed the gap between them. I felt as though I were watching one of those old-time Biblical epic movies with waves of extras creating endless throngs to showcase the power of the pharaohs. They came up through the spillways and out of the ditches, across volcanic lakes and down flumes. Each army was a juggernaut, moving toward us as if two vault doors were closing to lock us in. The hair-raising sight made us feel tiny and tortured, about to be killed by inches.

My skin came up in prickles. I coiled my arms around Bonnie and we made ourselves small.

Then the doors closed. The two squall lines of aliens came together around us, leaping over us to get to each other. Then the slashing and tearing began.

"Duck!" I dragged Bonnie down and pushed Carmichael sideways. He rolled away as two aliens landed between us, going at each other like cats.

The noise was mind-blowing. The world around us erupted into an atrocious and craven battle. The aliens leaped at each other and instantly tangled up into balls of two and three, after which others would leap onto the balls and create globes of five, ten, more, all tearing and biting at each other. Tails whipped out and stabbed back into the balls, spraying acid and glowing bodily juices around each battle ball. Parts of the aliens' brittle bones splintered past us as they tore each other apart, rolling in their huge balls and leaving tire tracks of body parts and acid sizzling on the writhing bodies of the not-quite-dead who were left behind. The aliens paid no attention to those of their own who were wounded or trampled. The fallen became launch pads for others to stage their own grisly barbarism.

"Move!" MacCormac shouted, and led the way.

We crawled on all fours, almost down to our stomachs. Carmichael couldn't stand the pressure and opened fire twice before following us. Edney shouted something unintelligible, and Carmichael responded with another round, which struck home on one of the creatures and sent a firework of acid spraying past us on our left.

"Come on, Ken!" I called. "Don't bother!"

"Too many of 'em!" Carmichael confirmed, and gave up trying to use his weapon. He might as well have been spitting at a tornado.

Corporal Edney doubled back to avoid the twisting body of a dying Xeno, a critical mistake that put her in the path of a massive battle ball. I started to shout a warning, but never got the chance. The battle ball of ripping, thrashing aliens rolled over Edney and when it came up off the ground, she was inside it.

She screamed—we heard the terrible sound of shock and defiance—and then we heard the ballistics of pistol fire inside the tumbleweed of aliens. Tail sections and an alien hand came blowing

out of the ball, and we caught the sight of Edney's tanned face showing between a pair of alien legs. Her mouth was open in horror, one eye nothing but a bloody socket. Her hand came out of the ball, still shooting wildly.

Then Edney's entire arm fell free of the ball and dropped to the ground, pistol, hand, and all. Her screams drained away. The battle ball rolled on, and she was gone with it.

"Shit, shit, shit!" MacCormac stopped crawling and rolled backward into me and Bonnie as we bumped up against a low-lying outcropping of silver stone.

Crumpled on the ground, we looked up at the sight that now completely blocked our way.

Three aliens, enough to kill a suburb, scowled down at us with their gracile bodies splayed in threat. They were hell's dragons, so frightful that even the Marines froze and just stared. We could have shot them, but there would be three more, then thirty more after them, then three hundred. I think in those seconds we established a silent pact to let ourselves die now, be over with it.

The trio of aliens stretched their arms and necks, rolled their heads back, and cried to the heavens with their glass-breaking shrieks. The uproar almost cracked our skulls. Bonnie dug her face into my shoulder, having seen enough, finally. MacCormac gritted his teeth and peeled back his lips in a mockery of the aliens, and Carmichael took his hat off to welcome death uncovered.

A scratching sound behind us alerted me and I dropped Bonnie and cranked around. More aliens—four of them, rose over the rock I was leaning against.

"MacCormac!" I warned. "Get out of the way!"

The colonel spun around as the three dragons launched themselves at other four. He was trapped!

The aliens clawed at each other and amazingly pushed MacCormac out of the way. It wasn't a mistake—they deliberately pushed him away! The seven aliens rolled into a weird ball, limbs and tails and heads all curved into each other, and actually rolled across the land in a nasty fighting mass.

I grabbed him and pulled him into the pile of us. "Get up and run!"

We scrambled out of the boiling pot, not even bothering to try to hide anymore. The riot went on, aliens slashing and biting at aliens by the hundreds, while we ran right through the middle of it, trying to avoid being splashed by acid or just rolled over by tumbling masses of aliens locked together in battle. Rolling around in every direction until they smashed into pillars or rocks or each other, the battle balls tumbled aimlessly as those aliens locked in them used their tails to whip outward and punch back in, spearing madly and leaving trails of dead fighters behind them like tire tracks on a demolition-derby field. The field now had a ghastly smell about it—acid, oil, saliva, a gaudy stink of flesh and befoulment. More butchery for this sad planet.

Our legs pumping against the unwelcoming ground, we crested a mound of glass that was the remains of a crumbled pillar. The mound was hard to climb since we didn't dare use our hands on the crushed glass. I pulled Bonnie, and she pulled Carmichael. Behind us, Edney and MacCormac scrambled awkwardly up the talus spread by the rest of us. When we hit the top of the mound, I took one look at the landscape and shouted, "Back!"

Right in front of us were two poison-packing robots, spewing hypersonic darts from their hoods, taking out aliens left, right, and around. The poisoned aliens forgot about each other and began biting and ripping at themselves, biting their own arms off and

trying to claw out the poison spreading inside them. If a sight can be more horrible than what we had already seen, this was it. The poison made them actually help in the killing process.

I fell on Bonnie, and lashed out a foot to trip Carmichael. “Down, down! Keep your head down!” I landed on my back and swept my arms out to hold Bonnie, then strapped Carmichael down with the leg that had tripped him.

MacCormac dropped on his side. “That’s all we need!”

“Maybe the aliens won’t kill us,” I said, “but those robots sure will.”

Trapped between the two approaching poison packers, we could almost feel our DNA screaming for attention. The poison packers were proximity weapons, not predisposed to operate at a distance, but the proximity was closing fast. In seconds, if we showed ourselves, they’d pick us up just as they were picking up the aliens, and they’d start shooting those darts at us.

“Stay here!” I shouted, and pushed Bonnie flat.

“Rory!” She didn’t want to leave me in the open.

I dropped and rolled as if my clothing were on fire, toward the corpse of one of the dead aliens—or the half of it that was left. Expecting to be burned by the acidic remains, I reached for the mass and came up with two disembodied snorkels and the sinews that once held them onto the creature’s back. With an instinctive heave, I threw the first mass like a hatchet at the nearest poison packer, then whirled and threw the second at the other PP. I dropped behind a stump just as its ultrasonic darts began to fire. Darts splattered on the stump above me.

Suddenly more darts came from the other direction, and then from both directions in rapid succession. Through the red glass stump, I watched the two PPs approach each other, their casings

smearred with dripping alien remains. Picking up the DNA signatures or the remains, they fired madly at each other, punching darts into each other's shells until their delicate innards were sparking and shattered. The one on the right lost its imperative and tipped sideways, crashing its helmet into a spear-shaped spire. Less than a second later, the other one tipped all the way over on its head, twirled madly, and thrashed its legs in a futile effort to stay upright, an effort that failed. It landed head-down in a pool of smoldering acid.

"Wow!" Carmichael appreciated. "That was smart!"

"Your hands!" Bonnie grasped my wrists.

"It's okay, I grabbed the outside ends."

"Nice going," MacCormac said. "Follow me, people."

"Gladly."

While the turbulence of the two alien crowds fighting continued around us, we scurried under cover of insanity back toward the blind. MacCormac seemed to know the way better than I did, so I was glad to let him lead. The Marines had the sense to know when weapons wouldn't do the trick and no longer tried to shoot at the aliens which seemed so effectively distracted and deliberately parted to let us pass— and if that weren't weird enough, actually seemed to protect us from each other. Just as we came around a bend in the flume, a mass of them rolled past us, but suddenly dissolved their battle ball when they almost hit us. They gawked at us briefly, and us at them, and off they went again in another direction, pointedly avoiding us.

"Keep going!" MacCormac shouted.

We got right up and ran harum-scarum again. I could tell by the way MacCormac checked every turn that he was looking for PPs. As for aliens, we just dodged between them and they let us go.

I wouldn't delude myself. They were still horrendously dangerous and we were walking some kind of tightrope. I didn't know what kind yet, but we certainly weren't safe among them, as my mother fantasized that we were. Bonnie said nothing like this ever lasted long in the animal world, and I believed her. Whatever the trigger was, it could be tripped any time and we'd be back in the soup.

"Hold!" MacCormac spat, and struck me in the chest with his arm.

We fell up against a sheer wall. He peeked around the edge of the wall.

"C'mere," he hissed, and drew me closer. He whispered, "Look."

I ducked down and peeked around his thick body.

Only twenty or so feet away were seven face-huggers sitting together on a rock, standing up on their eight fingers and quivering like bachelors in a dance line. Their tails were straight out behind them, but not flaccid or hanging on the rock. I held onto MacCormac's belt and we watched.

Slowly, trying not to draw attention, he pulled a grenade from his belt, right near my nose. In slow motion I watched the small and powerful casing rise out of the cartridge holder between his fingers. That grenade could take out everything within fifty feet, including us. But it was also the only way we could possibly get by seven of those parasites. We could only hope that the rock which was now hiding us would also give us some kind of protection. I knew that the concussion wave would probably knock us silly for several minutes, during which we'd be even more vulnerable than we were now. I didn't like the odds. I thought about stopping him.

He held the grenade in both hands, judging the distance. Just as his thumb went to the detonator and was about to come down, I saw



something and grasped his elbow.

The face-huggers were up on their fingertips, making tent-shapes of their bodies. The flank lobes with which they grasped the faces of their victims were up high in a gull-winged fashion instead of down in the usual position. I couldn't believe what I saw next . . . the huggers, all together, began to puff their bodies—*puff, puff, puff*—and the flank lobes began to grow into rings with membranes in the middles. The membranes spread wider and wider, thinner and thinner, the way balloons open up and get thinner as they're filled with air, except these membranes were flat and getting broader with every puff. The huggers, one by one, began to fan their membranes, flapping more energetically by the second, and there was a whirring sound, almost the way a hummingbird's wings make that constant buzz.

Then, in a true flocking manner, all seven face-huggers crouched on their fingertips and launched themselves into the air. They stretched their tails out behind them for balance and flew right over our rock and on into the sky over the field of rolling battle balls and dead and dying aliens.

As we watched, dumbfounded, the fliers were joined by other flying parasites. They flocked briefly in the sky, and buzzed off into a swarm, joined by still others. The swarm whirled to the left, then the right, then found a direction they liked and flew off into the distant sky over the glass spires, toward the Blue Valley.

We stared after them, slowly digesting the full gravity of the mess we were now in.

MacCormac blinked, still holding the uncharged grenade in both hands. "I'll be damned . . . they can fly."

# 12

“Theo released a pallet of poison packers. Somehow the ramp got open—he has no idea how. He saw some aliens, a dozen or more of them, coming up the ramp and he didn’t know what else to do. He shoved the crew down into the provisions hold and triggered one pallet—twenty PPs— hoping they’d take the aliens out and then just venture out into the landscape and go on their way. He figured we were probably dead, and even if we weren’t, we’d never live if the ship were taken.”

MacCormac paced away his bottled fury at the useless death of Corporal Edney, stalking back and forth in front of the deceptively calm main stealth curtain. He paused only to drop the communicator link into Clark’s hand. “He said he tried to contact us, but the frequencies were all jammed. He threw this out the ramp just before triggering the PPs. I was able to contact him, and he explained what had happened. He also told me the PPs instantly fired their darts on the aliens, and the aliens went crazy from the poison. He says the dying aliens attacked the PPs. Get that—even though they won’t attack us, they’ll still attack the PPs! Can you imagine that? So the PPs shot ‘em, and then the dying aliens jumped *on top of* the PPs

and clung there until their bodies fell apart and the acid burned through the PPs helmets! I'll bet nobody back at tactical ever though of *that!*"

We once again huddled in the main chamber, trying to think things through. Most of the campers were in other chambers. Only my mother, Gracie and Tad, and Neil were in here with Clark, MacCormac, Bonnie, Carmichael, Pocket, and me.

"So they're safe?" Clark asked hopefully. "My crew's safe in the provisions hold? Theo's okay? They're alive?"

MacCormac wiped the spittle from his mouth. "I think so."

"If they stay down there, they're safe," Pocket reassured. "Those robots aren't programmed to decode our locking system."

"If they come up," MacCormac said, "the PPs will take them out if there are any robots left in the ship. The aliens took out five PPs with their acid trick. The remaining PPs probably killed off the other aliens that were in the ship and then ventured on down the ramp and are now running wild in the landscape. We took out seven of them with grenades, then Rory took out another two. That means we still have six of them wandering the landscape which we have to avoid."

He fitfully kicked a crate and sent it crashing across the chamber. Full of silverware and dishes, it crashed so loudly that it left us all shaking. I didn't want to say what I was thinking—that the aliens had figured out the PPs already and maybe the assumption that we could save this planet at all was mistaken. This would be a real war, with Humanity sending more and more PPs in waves, then synthetics, then entire armies. The story was just beginning.

"I'm sorry about your young lady Marine," my mother told him. "They didn't mean to kill her. She just got in the way."

"And that's supposed to make me feel better?" MacCormac spat.

I turned to her. "It's never their fault, is it, M'am?" I turned to Gracie and Tad. "How did the ramp get opened?"

Tad closed his eyes in misery. Gracie just stared at me.

They stared at me. It was like a party, only without the cheer. I guess that would be a funeral.

"Your mechanical troubles are your own problems," my mother said.

"What's happening to them?" I demanded. "Why are they fighting each other?"

Gracie, standing halfway between my mother and me, seemed truly in the middle. "They've stopped foraging and we think the queen has stopped producing. They're putting all their energy into defense."

"That wasn't defense," I corrected.

"What is it, then?" Clark asked.

"It was more than defense. They're not hunkering down. They're going out to meet an enemy and fight. This isn't a castle under siege. It's a battlefield. They're not interested in us because they're putting all their energy into fighting each other." Still wanting some kind of direction, I persisted, "But *why* would they fight each other?"

Gracie thought about the question, and her answer wasn't what I expected. "Because the one thing ants never tolerate is other ants."

"Are you saying they're *not* fighting each other? They're fighting a whole other hive? Another colony?"

"Yes, they're different!" Bonnie spoke up. "When I was out there, at first I just thought it was the light shining through the glass, but it wasn't. The one hive, our hive, they're all black. The other hive, they've got some green and blue on them! I thought I was imagining it!"

"Green where and blue where?" Gracie asked.

"Blue between the ribs. Green inside the mouth and under the arms." Pocket made a low whistle and said, "That's subtle."

"But it bears up the theory of two hives," Clark said. "How can there be two hives? Didn't they all start with one 'hitchhiker' or just a few?"

"This could be their evolutionary strategy," Gracie supplied. "They diversify into several hives, develop new queens, and when they come upon each other they pause in their imperatives and fight in elimination rounds, working down to the mightiest hive. They can potentially evolve faster on the timeline of evolution. Very much faster."

"And this flying part?" Clark asked. "It's temporary?"

Gracie half-nodded, half-shrugged. "Like carpenter ants, they fly, they take over an area, they kill everything, and start a new colony. Then they don't fly anymore for a while."

"No bets on how long, right?" Pocket commented.

I waved him away from his compulsion. "Then when they expand enough and bump into each other, they stop everything and engage in this bug war. And the winners get the spoils."

"The spoils?" Bonnie wondered.

I forced myself to look at Gracie and Tad, Pocket and Clark.

"It's not just a bug war," I told them. "This is a war to see whose genetics get to spread all over the planet. We're not being protected. We're being stored for the winners to use. It's a DNA war."

\* \* \*

"This is it," I announced. "I've made my decision. I want to save this planet. I want to save the Blue Valley. We're getting out. Clark, you were right from the start. These things need to be wiped out. There's no more discussion of the ASA. These things are a plague and we're

going to smallpox 'em. With these animals here, this planet doesn't represent any kind of life." I turned to face my sister again. "Get everybody together. We're all leaving, if we have to stun every last one of you and carry you,"

Tad hung his hand on Gracie's shoulder as my sister stood there, arms crossed tight to her body, glaring at me. When her eyes shifted to my mother, I saw the first play of doubt.

M'am nodded. "If that is the verdict," she said, "gather everyone."

Gracie, fighting tears, didn't obey. She turned to me. "Is this the only way that works for you?"

I fixed my eyes on hers. "For you, too. We're releasing the payload. Anybody who stays will be hunted down and killed by the robots. That means Tad, too. And it means you. If the ship leaves without you, that's the end of your chance for a future together with him, with children . . . a future as somebody other than Jocasta Malvaux's daughter. If you care about him and yourself and these people, you'll bring them here right now. Because we're all leaving."

Fighting her own emotions, she nodded. She tried to speak, but couldn't. With a soulful look at Tad, she led him out of the tunnel.

My mother watched them go. Her self-control was admirable, I have to say.

"So you have won," she said quietly to me. "You've taken my daughter away from me."

All eyes were on me as my mother slipped away.

"Ken," I said to Carmichael, "Go with them and make sure they don't pull any fast ones."

Carmichael pushed off toward the tunnel. "Yes, sir!"

MacCormac forced himself to think clearly. "If we can avoid the PPs, we can get everybody back. If the PPs Theo released on the ship

have rolled down the ramp and are out of there, then the ship should be clear."

"We can scan with infrareds," Clark said. "The PPs show up on those scanners."

"We'll have to keep our heads low," the colonel went on. "If the PPs pick up our DNA signatures, we can't avoid those goddamned darts. Humans were never supposed to be on the planet with those robots. This is a complete screw-over."

"If Theo only released one pallet and there are only six left to avoid," Clark computed, "then we have a fair—"

"They're gone! They're gone! Mr. Malvaux! Rory!"

Private Carmichael came barreling out of the tunnel, all worked up.

"They're gone!" he gasped again.

"Who's gone, son?" Clark asked.

I caught Carmichael's arm. "You were watching them!"

He shook his head. "They were right in front of me, and then somehow they just weren't there anymore! Turned out I was following holographs! I can't find any of them!"

Pocket pushed through to the monitor bank and did his bosun thing at the keyboard. Dozens of pictures popped up of the interior of various chambers and the exterior of the compound. No longer were there any people milling around, sleeping or working or eating. The chambers were completely unpopulated, except for the one museum chamber and its stuffed trophy.

"Oh, glory, we'll never find them," Clark groaned. "We'll never find them in a thousand years! They're too good at this!"

"We'll flush them out," MacCormac swore. "Goddamn it, I'll grenade the whole mountain if I have to!"

“Listen!” Bonnie’s urgent warning came from the projector curtain, where she stood watching the picture of the dim glass forest. “Listen—”

A low moan began in the distance and grew more intense, deeper, until the whole landscape and the cave and all the sky was humming. With its underlying vibrato, the trombone call set the ground beneath us to quivering.

Clark stared out at the projected land. Pocket’s face swiveled as he twitched in fear. The Marines were still and tense.

The *hooing* noise rolled through the valleys and grottos, down the flumes and up the grades, traveling farther and farther across the land. It lasted ten . . . twelve . . . fifteen seconds. Maybe more.

When it began finally to draw back and fade away, we were all as spooked as anybody ever had been in history.

Bonnie turned to look at me. “It’s over.”



# 13

The DNA war was over. One side had won. They'd be coming for us, to present us to their parasites for impregnation. We were back on the losing side. The period of grace had ended.

With one confrontation comes all of them.

I shook my head, sighed, and let my anger lead the way.

"Mother!" I shouted. "Where are you!"

MacCormac made a noise of disgust. "Who are you kidding?"

"Rory . . ." Clark began at the same time, steeped in doubt.

"Oh, she can hear us," I told him contemptively. "You don't think she lets anybody do anything in here without her knowing about it, do you? She thinks she's a god. Gods are always watching."

Over the blind's muffled sound system came my mother's voice, velvety and superior.

*"We are in hiding. You will never find us. So you might as well leave. You are here without invitation and you have worn out your welcome. Go on your way and leave us in peace. Go home."*

"I'll be damned," Clark murmured.

"Fine!" Pocket snarled, pushing to his feet. "If that's the way they want it! To hell with 'em! Let's get out and save our own skins! They

want to be stupid? Fine! I'm all for suicide, as long as it's somebody else's! Let's get out and leave these morons to their own fate!"

"Here, here," MacCormac chimed.

"Fine," I said, "except for one thing."

"What thing?" Clark asked. "What one more thing can possibly matter anymore?"

I turned to him. "How many of them feel the way Rusty did? How many really want to leave, but they're so duty-bound to my mother that they're afraid to defy her? We can't just walk out on them."

"I can," Pocket said.

"Well, I can't!" I shouted, and kept going, shouting at the air. "I'm out for humans, Mother! We have a right to exist. We're in our own DNA war with these things. This is the next big evolutionary test for humanity!"

*"The stronger should prevail."*

"We're the stronger."

For a few seconds, silence fell. My words actually echoed. Maybe it was just in my head.

Then my mother's voice came again, somehow even more calm than before.

*"If you are so strong, my son, and your friends are so strong, then you can live or die on your own. I withdraw my protection from you."*

For a moment we didn't know what that meant. Then things started to shut down. The bank of monitors was first, falling dark all at once with a single bright flash before the power died. Immediately after, the projector curtain faded to black, then unhitched itself from its delicate conduit-loaded rod, and dropped to the ground in a glittery puff. Before us spread the outside world, bathed in a dangerous dawn.

The fabric of the tunnels suddenly began to snap and repeal, collapsing on themselves and returning to their original super-thin folded form. Light from holes in the rock above began to punch through the darkened anthill, as if giants were shining flashlights in at us from dozens of portals. The full dynamic of the stealth technology hiding us revealed itself as it died.

The fabric walls of the main chamber now fell around us, collapsing into thin rolls, leaving us standing in a bright rocky hole, open to the world outside.

We blinked in freakish morning light. With no place left to hide, we were being forced out.

MacCormac seized his pulse rifle, but the expression on his face was near-panic. Knowing that two Marines with rifles could never protect all of us from the multiple terrors out there, he handed me Berooz's pulse rifle, then handed Clark and Pocket each a pistol.

"We've got to run," MacCormac ordered. "Stay quiet and keep your heads down. I'll take the lead. Carmichael, take up a position in the middle and watch our flanks!"

I pushed Clark and Pocket toward the wide-open flume, looked to make sure Bonnie was behind me, and caressed the pulse rifle.

"All right, Mother, we're leaving," I announced. "Hell of a way to win."

*"I hope I never see you again,"* she said over the sound system, which now had a hollow quality in the open air.

"Yeah," I muttered, "but I think you're the one who's weak." I raised my voice, just in case any of the others could still hear me. They deserved to know. "Did you tell these people the truth before you brought them here?"

There was a pause. Not the good kind.

I thought she might speak, but she didn't. By now, Clark and Bonnie, Pocket, MacCormac, and Carmichael were all waiting for her to speak. Instead, I was the one who spoke.

"Were you strong enough to be honest?" I demanded. "Did you tell them they were coming here to die glorious deaths in your holy service? Did you tell them you brought them here to be martyrs? That you never intended for them to leave this outpost alive? Did you tell them what their lives mean to you?"

I pushed a fresh cartridge into the pulse rifle and slapped it into place.

"I know I forced your hand," I finished. "Now you be sure to tell those people that you're taking sides with the aliens."

With that, standing out in virtually the open, I signaled to MacCormac. "No reason to stay, Colonel."

"Single file!" he ordered, and jogged toward the flume. The rest of us went out behind him, never to return to this man-made haven which had fallen away under us.

We broke out into the open and ran, but not too fast, not so fast that we became clumsy, that somebody fell or got hurt. MacCormac paced us from the front of the line.

Even though it was trying to be morning, much of the land was still skirted in darkness. We could barely see the path in front of us to keep good footing. As I ran, I thought about the Blue Valley, probably the only remaining pristine area on this continent. Who knew how far-flung the infestation was? Was it worldwide? Was the damage already done and could it ever be reversed? Was this planet doomed, extermination efforts or not?

That was for smarter people to decide. I had one thing on my mind, and that was launching off this cursed red mirror.

The huts! There they were—we were almost to the abandoned camp.

MacCormac slowed us down before entering the camp, leading with his pulse rifle like an urban Special Forces leader. I recognized the stance and took it myself, not knowing what we were looking for, afraid of what we'd find.

"Looks clear!" the colonel called. "Carmichael?"

"Clear right, sir!" the boy called from a few paces behind and to the right of me.

Suddenly the sound of ripping paper escorted a flap of wings from over the top of a hut—just that fast—a skitter of knuckles, the whip of a tail, and Colonel MacCormac was struck in the face.

"Oh, God!" Bonnie shrieked, and ducked back.

MacCormac went down hard, clawing at the thing on his face. The parasite's tail lashed around his throat and tied itself tight.

I turned the muzzle of my rifle on MacCormac's head, but that wouldn't work! I threw my rifle to Clark and tore into the animal on MacCormac's face with my bare hands. The strength of the eight elongated fingers was unbelievable! I couldn't budge so much as one claw.

"No!" I cried wildly, and dug my fingernails into its pulpy flesh. Its wings began to shrink, returning to that rounded state in which they were a set of clamps on the victim's cheeks. I dug my nails into one of the wings, popped through the membrane, and ripped the wing off. I felt the sting of acid burns on my hands, but rage drove me to ignore it. I swore at the creature something unintelligible, and went after the other wing.

MacCormac struggled briefly, then went limp. His hands released the creature on his face and he fell into my arms with the

malignancy locked onto his head, settling down to its wicked, pitiless work.

I let him fall to the ground and rearranged myself on my knees beside him and pulled his service knife from his belt. Damn it, I'd slice the noxious thing off layer by layer!

There was a loud boom next to my ear. My hands and the knife turned red, wet, and hot. MacCormac lay at my knees, now a body without a head, missing its left shoulder too. The remains of his head and the face-hugger were soaking into the skulch a foot away from me.

I looked up.

Private Carmichael gazed down in that awful moment after. His face was a plate of misery and resolution. I knew he had followed orders, but his expression betrayed more.

He shook himself and turned his weapon on the tops of the huts, in case any more huggers were flitting around on the wing.

Clark pulled me to my feet. "Come on, Rory."

He kept the pulse rifle, but handed me the plasma pistol he'd been carrying. Shaken, startled, numb, and hardly knowing he was talking to me, I let him pull me along. Poor MacCormac—all he'd wanted to do was just the best thing at every step.

"Keep moving!" Pocket called from the far end of the camp. He was almost through. "It's clear! Don't lag!"

That was when something jumped out at him.

Emotionally exhausted, I just paused and watched, ready for anything.

Okay, anything but this.

"Rusty!" I yanked free of Clark's grip and rushed toward Pocket, who was helping to his feet the last person I expected ever to see again on this planet.

Rusty was a bruised and cut-up mess, his hair all natty and his blue suit in rags, but he was here, alive.

Knotting my fists into his collar, I dragged him all the way to his feet. "You're alive!"

"I'm alive . . . I lived . . . "

"How?"

He pounded my shoulder in victory and said, "Survived the fall somehow. I woke up on the floor of the ravine next to that Xeno you killed! I've been climbing for hours! I was so scared you'd leave without me! Can I still go with you?"

"Can you? *Can* you!" I threw my arms around him and whooped with joy. Finally something to go right!

"I don't want to stay here with Jocasta any more!" he babbled, looking at me and Clark with pleading eyes. "She doesn't care about us! She only cares about those things . . . I'm so sorry I didn't fess up right when you first landed! Those people in the huts—" He pointed at the makeshift tombs around us. "She set them up! They were the ones who didn't like it here, who wanted to call Earth and have a ship sent for us. One by one, she arranged for them to get caught by the huggers or for their stealth tech to break down. I was the only one who knew about it, because I pretended to agree with her. Jesus, it feels good to spill the beans!" He huffed out a breath and looked around. "Where is everybody? All my friends—are they all going with you? Are they already at the ship?"

How could I tell him he was the only one who would be freed of this planet?

"No, we're right here," a voice said from nowhere.

It was my sister's voice. Between two of the huts the fabric of the air began to ripple. Forms appeared, then solidified, two by two, into the missing researchers. They were hiding right here all along, in a

clutch of personal blinds, probably among the first developed before they moved into the big blind.

My sister walked toward me, her face red and plastered with tears. Behind her, Tad came up close.

"It was Jocasta all along," Tad said. "I've been trying to get Gracie to leave here for months. Gracie's been protecting me from your mother. She knew Jocasta would kill anybody who betrayed her."

I reached out to shake his hand. "You're not betraying her by wanting your own life."

My sister blinked at me, holding back sobs, but I could tell that for the first time in years, she was with me. And I was with her.

I touched her face and gave her a little smile. Right here in the middle of hell.

"Come on," I said. "Let's go home."

Private Carmichael—Ken, Esquire—took charge in a manner that would've made MacCormac proud. He led the way as the gaggle of us fell in behind him. In tight formation we struck out through the glass forest that separated us from the landing area. Finally—seemed like years—we saw the ship.

The *Vinza* was as we had left it, but now the magnetic field propulsion units were on, whirring and hot from the plasma being directed through its reaction chambers. Theo had fired the ship up, anticipating that we were coming. Good!

As we approached, the loading ramp began to lower in true mechanical fashion. Clark dashed aboard first, brewing with purpose, and was instantly yelling orders inside.

"Couplers on max! Prepare for launch and deploy! Theo! Barry! Where's Gaylord!" He kept shouting, but I didn't care.

I stepped aside and Carmichael went to the other side of the ramp, and together we funneled the remaining researchers into the



ship, every one of them more than glad to pile in.

Rusty put his foot on the ramp and turned to me, clasping my hand again. "I don't know what to say! You came just in time!"

I grinned at him and clapped my hand to his arm in gratification. "That's my job. To come in the nick of time."

"I heard this horrible noise, like a factory whistle that just went on and on—and I kept running. I thought it might be your ship trying to take off without me, so I ran right through a whole swarm of Xenos! They just looked at me and left me alone! I figured it was a miracle!"

"Yeah," I agreed. "You say you ran through them *after* you heard the noise?"

"I really ran as fast as I could. My legs hurt! My chest hurts! I can't believe I made it!"

If I'd ever been sick to my stomach in my life, this was the worst. No matter how I added it up,

"Rusty . . ."

"Yeah?"

I drew my pistol upward and aimed it at his chest. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry . . . I don't think I can let you get on the ship."

"Huh?" He reacted, then laughed. "Oh—funny!"

That's when the convulsion started. Rusty coughed, gagged, and pressed a hand to his chest.

"Oh, no—" I choked. "goddamned squalid bastards!"

Horror erupted in Rusty's eyes. He grabbed my shirt and dropped to his knees, shuddering and heaving, then pitched over backward onto the ramp. A mound appeared under his blue suit as if a bony fist were trying to punch through from inside.

Rusty pulled me down with him and snatched at the pistol. His eyes beseeched the worst favor of me. As my own lips peeled back

with disgust and empathy, I drew the pistol around, pushed it against the bulge in his chest, and did the only thing I could do to ease his horrific plight. Unshrinking, I pulled the trigger.

Rusty died at my feet, along with his tormenter, still holding my arm.

“Sir, I’m so sorry,” Carmichael uttered.

With Rusty’s blood soaking into my trouser legs, I gently rolled the body off the ramp, wishing there was time to bury him decently in this indecent place.

“Get aboard,” I said.

I looked around to make sure there was no one else still waiting to board.

More than ready to leave, I put my foot on the ramp and took hold of the scissor strakes which would pull it up after I came aboard.

“Rory.”

My shoulders hunched at the sound of that voice. I turned and looked.

At the base of two large red pillars, with the morning light kissing from behind and causing a faint aurora, stood my mother—holding Bonnie by the arm. Against Bonnie’s throat my mother held a disembodied alien tail spike, sharp and strong enough to take Bonnie’s head off with a thrust.

M’am waited until she was sure I saw clearly what was going on. She held Bonnie by the arm with her bony white hand, and Bonnie stiffly complied, with the spike pressing against her jugular so firmly that I could see the grazed red welt rising.

“She belongs to me now,” M’am said. “I need her now, more than you do. As long as I have her, you will not release your poison

robots. She'll be safe here, Rory. I will take care of her. Launch your ship and go. Leave me and my new daughter here."

They were almost beautiful there, bathed in pink light, backdropped by drapings of gray gauze. As if to punctuate the sonnet, I saw Bonnie's pet bat hanging in the gauze behind them, confused and not knowing what to do. The little Earthling had followed us.

And so had others. In the depths of the glass forward, I saw the haunting movements of aliens moving closer. They shifted in their craven fluid way, coming in our direction, looking like dragons moving through a medieval passion play.

I stepped off the ramp and moved a few steps out into the open. I didn't dare try to shoot. Even with the pistol's fair accuracy, the refracted morning light through the pillars created a prism effect and ruined my aim. I could easily hit Bonnie. And as hard as my heart felt right now, I wasn't sure I could actually shoot my own mother. I didn't trust myself.

Instead, I put the pistol down on the black skulch. When I straightened up again, I raised my arm, holding my elbow straight. Carefully, I lowered my chin once, then raised it, and lowered my arm.

Once again, I raised my arm, but just slightly this time, with my fist knotted.

Bonnie balled her left fist, the one my mother couldn't see. Slowly, she began to raise her arm, straight out at her side.

In the background, Butterball the bat unfolded her raincoat-like wings, flexed one, then the other. The wide strutted membranes took on a Gothic grace. She dropped her grip on the gauze and was instantly flying in that neurotic nut-case batty way, right toward the two women.

"Bonnie, down!" I blared.

She dropped like a sack of sand.

The bat veered toward the now-empty spot where Bonnie's arm had been, but there was no place to land except my mother's head.

The bat's enormous wings closed around M'am's hair and folded tight around her face. She screamed inside the leather hood and beat her face with her little hands. Bonnie scrambled to her feet and ran to me.

"Get aboard." My voice was strangely calm as I shoved her up the ramp.

Behind my mother, the ghouls drew closer.

"Rory!" Bonnie called from the top of the ramp.

"Coming," I said.

I stretched my arm out straight to my side and raised it high, with my fist in a ball.

As my mother squealed in her panic, Buttercup disengaged her big wide wings and managed to launch from my mother's head. My mother was on her knees now, shocked and off-balance.

Whirling once in the air, Buttercup landed on my forearm and took an experienced purchase there. She let her giant wings go limp and hang almost to the ground, adjusted her grip on my wrist, then politely folded her wings around herself like a girl at a prom adjusting her wrap.

My mother and I met gazes for a last few seconds, and for the first time in our lives I think we understood each other. She drew herself to her feet and regained her poise, just as the aliens came around the pillars to surround her.

The interior of the ship was warm and buzzing with energy. Bonnie and Clark met me in the bay as the ramp whirred and clanked closed behind me.

I stroked the bat hanging from my arm and took the piece of fruit Bonnie offered, and fed it to the little doggie face. Buttercup happily took the fruit in her batty hands and began to eat. With my other arm, I pulled Bonnie against me and gave her the kiss I'd been saving up for the right moment. "How would you like to be a really wealthy woman?"

"Rory, it's your call," Clark said, as he had always promised. "Do we deploy or not?"

I looked at the cargo bay, where Pocket and Gaylord, Theo, and the deckhands stood poised beside the belly cranes and huge roller hatches that would drop the containers full of poison packers onto the planet as we safely rose into the sky, never to look back.

"Deploy," I told him. "Nothing down there but monsters."

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Michael Jan Friedman**, a resident of Long Island, is the author of more than seventy books of fiction and nonfiction, about half of them set somewhere in the wilds of the *Star Trek* universe. Eleven of his books have appeared on the prestigious bestseller lists published in *The New York Times* and several more have been bestsellers in Europe, Latin America, and Asia.

**Diane Carey** is a best-selling science fiction writer with fifty-three books to her credit, including nine *New York Times* bestsellers for her *Star Trek* work and several number one chain bestsellers. She holds the distinction of having written many of the episode-to-novel adaptations of seminal *Star Trek* episodes, including the novelizations of the finale for *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* and the premiere of *Star Trek Enterprise* and has gained a reputation for her care and attention in expanding and extending the rich backstories of the characters she works on.

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