

ALIENS: THE AFTERMATH

An original fanfiction sequel story by Michael K. Lyman

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FORWARD

In 1979 the movie *Alien* was released, written by Dan O'Bannon and directed by Ridley Scott, with the design of the alien creature and its visuals heavily influenced and guided by the work of artist H.R. Giger, whose nightmarish biomechanical paintings were an inspiration for the look of the film. *Alien* was a stellar example of superb filmmaking in every sense of the word, and was one of the few films to have a strong, independent female protagonist, Ellen Louise Ripley. The film won an academy award for best visual effects, three Saturn Awards, and a Hugo Award for Best Dramatic Presentation, along with numerous other nominations (source: Wikipedia). Considered one of the greatest science fiction films of all time, it spawned countless toys, comic books, novels and video games.

It was only a matter of time before a sequel was created, and thankfully for all of us, it was James Cameron who wrote and directed that sequel, *Aliens*, released in 1986. Whereas *Alien* was primarily a horror/suspense film, *Aliens* was more action-oriented, and was nominated for seven Academy Awards, creating new characters with dialog and catch phrases that quickly entered pop culture vernacular ("Game over, man, game over!"). The two films that followed *Aliens* are widely panned, and I personally do not consider them to be canon at all. As far as I'm concerned, the *Aliens* timeline ended with the military ship *Sulaco* heading back to Earth with the sole survivors of the disastrous rescue mission on LV-426: Ripley, Bishop, Hicks and Newt.

So what happened when the *Sulaco* returned to Earth?

If you have not seen either movie, this story will not make much sense to you. If you have, then I hope you will enjoy this story, which is not an action story, like *Aliens*, nor a horror/suspense story, like *Alien*. In fact, the alien xenomorph does not appear in this story at all. This is my take on what happened when the *Sulaco* returned to Earth, with Ripley wanting to get on with her life and the company, Weyland Yutani, determined to cover up its culpability for its crimes at all costs. It is an *intrigue* story and I have tried to make it as realistic and believable as possible.

Have I succeeded? That, dear reader, is for you to decide.

If you enjoyed it, or even if you didn't, **let me know**. I'd very much like to receive your feedback, comments and observations (just keep it polite and constructive, please). Send me an email at magnumarts1@gmail.com, and feel free to follow me on [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#). I have spent a lot of time writing and editing it; it has been a fun project, and I feel that it neatly wraps up Ellen Ripley's saga in a believable way.

Thanks for reading and again, I hope you enjoy it.

Michael K Lyman

ONE

The large ship glided with shark-like silence through space, its momentum carrying it forward, with only periodic bursts of its engines to keep it on course. At 385 meters in length and 78,000 metric tons, the Conestoga-class starship was long and resembled a weapon, with multiple projections thrusting forward from its bow, indicative of its military nature. Battered and heavily modified, its lines were awkward and its engines oversize. No graceful lines for aesthetics; every shape and protrusion served a purpose without regard for appearance. On the side of the vessel, almost as an afterthought, as if a name was inconsequential for such a utilitarian piece of equipment, was the word *SULACO*.

Inside, the ship was silent. The mess hall, consisting of spartan aluminum tables and benches, framed by aircraft-grade lockers and food dispensing machines, was deserted. The corridors were empty, dark and devoid of the atmosphere required to sustain its crew. Nothing moved in the primary cargo bay, the largest open area on the ship. The dark metal deck had several large areas lower than the deck itself, airlock doors that opened into space for cargo loading. Metal chains hung motionless from the ceiling. The large dropship was perched securely from its cradle like a giant, malignant steel insect, waiting for its next mission. Dormant cargo loaders, looking like prehistoric robots frozen in time, stood mid-pose where they had been left. A motorized cart with an enormous missile strapped to its top was secured nearby. The lights were dim, giving the bay a cave-like appearance.

In the med-bay, a long row of angled cylindrical canisters were lined up like high-tech coffins. Lights glowed on the covered control panels of only three of them; the others were unoccupied. Insulated umbilicals and cables hung from the ceiling, connected to the canisters, which emitted thin mists of vapor while its inhabitants slept in deep stasis.

The seats in front of the control stations on the flight deck near the top of the ship were empty; the large bridge area consisted of both upper and lower control panels, giving it a slightly claustrophobic atmosphere, and a central navigation/display table, all of which looked out over large viewports that offered a sweeping view ahead of the ship. In the darkened bridge, the only illumination came from a small scattering of indicator lights as the ship operated automatically, the black display screens unneeded until the crew was revived. Atop one of the forward control consoles was a Hawaiian hula dancer kewpie doll, frozen in mid-sway, with no movement to spur her hip swinging.

Two of the dark screens suddenly blinked to life, displaying cascading columns of numbers, the speakers emitting garbled electronic noises to the empty flight deck. Another screen flickered to light with a stellar map display. Slowly, almost reluctantly, screens began to come alive and indicator lights began to glow, illuminating the bridge with an almost festive aura.

In the empty hallways, lights sputtered into brightness, and deep within the ship, environmental controls awakened, beginning to bring the interior into the correct temperature for its inhabitants. Air pressure, temperature and oxygen slowly reached the required levels.

Lights came on in the med-bay, illuminating the canisters. Two of the canisters opened, the two semi-cylindrical doors opening in opposite directions like a clamshell to reveal the occupants. One occupant was a small blond girl, one adult female.

The adult female, Ripley, wearing a white tank top t-shirt and white underwear, slowly stirred as her body temperature regained its normal levels. Eyes blinked, as if from a particularly deep, but not altogether rejuvenating sleep. Slowly she sat up, looking around her, bewildered for a moment as to where she was. Almost absentmindedly, she pulled away the electrodes and attachments on her body that had regulated her breathing, temperature and brain functions.

Climbing out slowly, the cold deck on her bare feet helping to revive her, she looked around at the strange surroundings. She was aboard a spaceship. What was the name of it again...?

The began with "S"....the *Sulaco*. That was it. The *Sulaco*.

She was on her way home. As the fog of stasis lifted she began to remember more. An inhospitable planet, a rescue mission, aliens. Lots of **aliens**. She had survived. In fact not only had she survived, she now had a new person in her life to take care of.

Newt.

She went over to the canister next to hers and looked down at the small young blonde-haired girl who was stirring from sleep. Newt, whose real name was Rebecca Jorden, yawned hugely, rubbing one clenched fist into a drowsy eye. She looked up at Ripley and smiled sleepily. Returning the smile, Ripley knelt beside the canister.

"Hey," Ripley said softly. "We made it. We're home."

Newt looked up at her with big eyes. In a very small voice she whispered, "We're really home?"

Ripley nodded and smiled, feeling the sting of tears In her eyes. "Yes sweetheart, we're really home."

She helped Newt out of the canister and took her by the hand, leading her toward the lockers that surrounded the mess area, Newt looking around wonderingly at the strange surroundings for which comfort was a low priority. Ripley said, "I'm going to get you set up with some breakfast, then I have to go up to the flight deck and arrange for our approach and docking. You'll be safe here."

Newt looked up and gave Ripley a military salute. "**A**-firmative,"

■ ■ ■

Stepping onto the flight deck of the *Sulaco* wearing a blue jumpsuit and sneakers, Ripley surveyed the empty cockpit which was bathed in the soft glow of multiple computer screens showing various readouts of ship operations. Data scrolled endlessly over some screens, others had constantly changing ship status displays. Narrow deep-set viewports in the front and the sides offered a view of space, with the multi-colored glow of Jupiter approaching off of the port side, looking like an enormous carnival treat.

Ripley settled into the navigator seat and reached up, flipping a series of switches on the overhead console to activate the ship's primary navigation and control systems. She confirmed that life support was operating at the correct levels, and that the *Sulaco*'s engines were also operating normally. The ship had not generated any alerts that needed immediate attention. She confirmed that they were in the correct star system (thinking briefly of the *Nostramo* and her bewilderment at seeing the wrong star system upon their re-awakening over fifty-seven years ago).

Normally, a synthetic life form (or artificial person, as they liked to be called) would have been constantly monitoring ship operations while its crew was in stasis; artificial persons did not need sleep, did not grow bored and were ideal for long-distance interstellar travel. However Bishop, the *Sulaco*'s artificial person, had been torn in half by the alien queen who had made it aboard the ship before Ripley was able to eject it into space. He was in one of the stasis pods so that he could be repaired. Consequently, there had been no one to monitor the battered and heavily-used *Sulaco* during the trip home. It was a sizable risk, but fortunately it seemed to have paid off.

She slipped on a headset, tapped in the commands to align the transmission dish, selected the proper frequency, adjusted the transmission controls and opened a channel.

"Antarctica traffic control, this is the military vessel *USS Sulaco*, registry number 5876829, on approach to Earth, requesting clearance and an approach vector, over. Repeat, this is the military vessel *Sulaco* on approach, requesting a vector."

The answer came in a few minutes, scratchy and slightly garbled by the long distance. "*Sulaco*, this is Antarctica control, maintain your current course and speed. Prepare for boarding by ICC Quarantine from Jupiter Station. No crew is to leave the vessel until cleared by ICC Quarantine personnel. Confirm."

"Roger, Antarctica, maintaining course and speed. Transmitting docking navigation codes now. Medical assistance is required upon docking, repeat medical assistance required."

The response came back: "Acknowledged *Sulaco*. Please state the nature of the medical assistance required and number of patients."

"One patient with third degree acid burns, in stasis awaiting medical assistance. One artificial life-form, body severed, higher brain functions intact."

"Roger, *Sulaco*. ICC quarantine ship in route, ETA to rendezvous T minus 30 minutes from Jupiter station. Antarctica out."

Ripley sat back and watched Jupiter draw closer through the viewports, the furious storms swirling slowly like a massive, cloudy marble. ICC quarantine would be aboard for roughly forty-eight hours while they conducted an exam of the ship, its exterior, and all persons aboard to make sure there were no contagious organisms that could affect Earth's environment.

Like an alien.

Looking at the control panel, deep in thought, Ripley came to a decision, and quickly got out of the navigator station, ducking out of the flight deck.

TWO

The Interstellar Commerce Commission quarantine vessel arrived not long after. A team of quarantine specialists boarded the *Sulaco* in self-contained pressure suits, and began the methodical process of examining the *Sulaco* for the presence of any organisms which could pose a threat to Earth. The examination also included thorough physical exams of both Ripley and Newt, which consisted of x-rays, viral and toxicology scans, blood and tissue analysis and DNA tests. Because the other survivor, Corporal Hicks, was still in stasis and so badly injured, he was left in the canister; once back at earth he would be quarantined and receive medical care. Outside the ship, small automated sensor drones slowly scoured every inch of the exterior of the ship with sensor probes to make sure no invasive species had hitched a ride.

The ICC quarantine personnel were polite but businesslike. They were not interested in idle conversation, nor where they had come from or what happened there, and they spoke to Ripley and Newt only when they had to ask their many questions and communicate important information. For the most part, Ripley didn't see them as they scoured the ship, and she and Newt spent the time talking and getting to know each other better.

After forty-eight hours, the *Sulaco* was cleared and allowed to continue to Earth which, from Jupiter was only a few more days. Antarctica traffic assumed navigational control of the *Sulaco*, the way harbor pilots used to guide big ships in and out of port, reducing the chances of collisions with the numerous other vessels which were traveling to the various destinations in the solar system. Ripley remained on the bridge with Newt fascinated by the entire process.

In the fifty-seven years Ripley had been in stasis, the network of satellites and orbiting space stations hovering over Earth had increased seemingly exponentially. Before leaving for LV-426 she had not had time to see for herself how much. Geosynchronous orbiting stations serviced cargo ships and starships that were arriving and departing Earth and, like airports, the spaceports had repair and maintenance facilities, offices, research labs and power generating facilities. Supporting these and the people who passed through them were temporary living quarters, lounges and restaurants, and even stores and gift shops. Small repair and delivery shuttles glided importantly between the cities that hovered over the glowing blue and white planet, attending their various tasks, while orbital shuttles took passengers to and from the surface.

As the *Sulaco* approached Earth, Ripley hoisted Newt onto one of the consoles so she could see out of the forward viewports. There were four large ships visible in space dock at the moment; the number of cargo and starships parked in orbit was relatively small; large ships were extremely expensive to operate and the less time they sat in spacedock the more money they made for their owners. Skeletal frames surrounded them, cables and passenger breezeways connected to the self-contained pods that made up the space stations. Numerous lighted windows dotted the irregular, seemingly haphazard structures. More plentiful were empty space dock facilities awaiting the arrival of more ships.

As the *Sulaco* moved slowly toward the assembled hive of activity, Antarctica Control used the ship's navigational thrusters to guide it to an empty slip. The station was older and heavily used; spider-like appendages branched out from its central hub where some smaller vessels were already docked. A couple of tiny space tugboats, navigation lights blinking,

accompanied the ship as it drew closer. With well-practiced care, the ungainly ship was slowly eased into position beside one of the appendages, which moved forward and connected with the primary personnel airlock. Umbilicals supplying power and data transfer were connected by the one-man tug ships.

At long last, Ripley had made it back to Earth once more.

■ ■ ■

The inner airlock door opened with a sharp hiss, revealing two men dressed in expensive looking suits, one of which was carrying a metal briefcase. The taller one was thin, with a lean, angular face, deep set eyes and short, close-cropped hair that was accented by gray at his temples. The other man was younger, with a carefully styled head of dark brown hair that looked as if it was given more attention than was warranted. More heavysset than his counterpart, his face was round, with cheeks that accented his mouth like parentheses. He was smiling, a smile that looked like a stock expression reserved for what was expected to be awkward situations.

The tall one stepped forward, extending a hand, smiling with a politeness underlined by the faintest trace of either high self-confidence or arrogance. "You must be Ellen Ripley. I'm Markus Jacobson, from Weyland- Yutani. This is my associate Bradley Templehof. Welcome back."

After shaking his hand, Ripley folded her arms and regarded him neutrally. "What are you doing here, Mr. Jacobson? This is a military vessel. This mission is under military jurisdiction. Are the Colonial Marines aware that you're here?"

Jacobson smiled indulgently. "You needn't concern yourself, Ripley. We are all on the same team here. My associate and I just wanted to meet you and see what kind of assistance we could render. I understand there have been some injuries?"

Before she could answer, Tempelhof ducked past them and proceeded into the interior of the ship. Ripley turned and looked at him as he walked away, confused. "Where is he going?" she asked.

"About those injuries," Jacobson said smoothly. "How many are there?"

Taken a little off guard, Ripley turned back to Jacobson. "One, Corporal Hicks. He has very bad acid burns from an encounter with the aliens from LV-426. He's the only surviving member of the platoon and needs to be examined by ICC quarantine."

Jacobson looked caught off guard and genuinely astonished. "He's the only one who survived?"

Ripley nodded.

"How about the colonists? How many of the colonists survived?"

"Only one," she answered. "A little girl by the name of Rebecca. I should like to point out that-

"I think it's best if we wait for the debriefing and the inquest," Jacobson interrupted, regaining his professional composure. "It sounds like there are a lot of things that happened out

there that need to be examined but this is not the time or the place. The important thing is to get the surviving Marine the medical attention he needs and we can sort out the rest once we leave spacedock.”

Ripley was nonplussed and could think of nothing to say in response. In the silence that followed, they heard footsteps approaching. Turning quickly, they saw a man walk forward, in Colonial military dress uniform. He was tall and rail thin, with a chiseled, angular face that looked like well scrubbed rock on a Maine coastline, a blade-like nose and deep set eyes. He had a tight military crew cut accented with gray like new frost on a cold morning. He did not look happy as he drew up to Ripley and Jacobson.

“I am Colonel Williams,” he said without preamble and in a tone that indicated he was expecting resistance. He looked at Jacobson. “Who are you and what are you doing on this ship?”

Jacobson smiled broadly, the smile of a man who is used to smoothing over difficult situations and usually getting what he wants as a result. “Ahh, Colonel,” he said. “Glad you are here. My name is Jacobson from the company, and my associate and I came to render assistance. Now that you’ve arrived, we’ll leave the situation in your capable hands.”

Tempelhof reappeared, giving Jacobson a barely perceptible nod, and headed toward the airlock. Jacobson turned to follow him. “Just a moment,” Williams barked. “You haven’t answered my question. Your presence violates military regulations. What are you doing aboard a military vessel without authorization?”

“We’re all on the same team Colonel,” Jacobson said smoothly. “There will be an inquest and of course we encourage the military to participate.”

Turning to Ripley, Jacobson said, “Ripley I am glad you arrived safely and I’m looking forward to reading your report.” Before either of them could respond, Jacobson stepped into the airlock with Tempelhof and pressed the button. The door shot down with a compressed hiss.

Williams rounded on Ripley. “Did he say why he’s here, what he’s doing aboard this ship?”

“You’ll have to ask him, Colonel,” Ripley responded. “I tried to tell him that this was a military vessel but he wouldn’t listen.”

He shook his head slightly as if already tired of the subject. “Where is Lieutenant Gorman?”

“Gorman is dead.”

His eyebrow twitched in surprise. “*Dead...*?” She nodded. “What about Sergeant Apone?”

“I’m afraid he’s dead too. The only surviving member of your platoon is Hicks, and he’s badly injured. He’s in stasis right now. Bishop is too; his body was severed but his brain functions are intact. The only other survivors are myself and a single colonist.”

Williams looked at Ripley with a black look of contained fury. “What the hell happened up there!?”

She felt suddenly tired, a condition she anticipated she would be experiencing frequently in the days ahead. “I’d rather go over this at the debriefing. The short story is that the colonists discovered the derelict spacecraft that contained the alien eggs. The aliens overran the colony,

killing all the colonists and built a nest at the base of the atmospheric processing station. It will all be in my report, plus the mission logs once you download them.”

Williams ran a hand over his face with frustrated resignation. “Where is Hicks?”

“I told you. He’s in stasis, I’ll take you to him.”

■ ■ ■

Colonel Williams peered into the stasis canister at the unconscious form of Hicks, who was heavily bandaged, an arm swaddled in burn wrap and in a splint, head turned to one side, mouth open slightly as he breathed. A white eye patch covered one eye. The frost on the inside of the stasis chamber framed him like a painting of tragedy.

“What happened to him?” Williams asked.

“It’s an acid injury, from the blood of one of the aliens.” Ripley answered. “He and I were trying to escape the compound and were in an elevator when one of the aliens tried to keep the doors from closing. Hicks fired at it and the blood ate through his body armor.”

“The alien’s blood did *this*?” he asked with a sense of incredulity.

She nodded. “The creatures have blood which is very much like molecular acid. It eats through almost everything.”

“What about the rest of the platoon? How did they die?”

Ripley sighed. “It will all be in my report, Colonel so I don’t feel like going over the whole thing right now. I’ll be telling my version of events over and over again, I’m sure.”

Williams gave her a hard look. “Then give me the abbreviated version. These were good soldiers. I don’t want to wait for the debriefing, I want to know how they died.”

She became angry, remembering how ineffective Gorman had been, and how she had had to take matters into her own hands in order to evacuate the surviving Marines from the alien nest in the processing station. She said, “If your Marines were so important to you, why did you send a lieutenant with no experience?”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about sending a rookie lieutenant on a very dangerous mission. He had only one actual combat drop, and it was obvious he had no idea what he was doing when the fighting started.”

Williams, to his credit, looked slightly chagrined. “The selection of Lieutenant Gorman was not my decision. It was forced upon me by higher ups.”

“Higher ups that are connected to the company? To Weyland-Yutani?”

He looked up, surprised. “Why do you say that?”

Walking towards the mess area, where Newt was entertaining herself, Ripley said, “Because this mission was compromised from the start by company influence, that’s why. Carter Burke was determined to sneak one of these things past ICC quarantine. Gorman was obviously inexperienced and in over his head; I suspect that’s why he was chosen, to make Burke’s job easier.”

Williams did not meet Ripley's eyes. "There are certain elements of this mission and the way it was planned that are classified. I'm not at liberty to discuss them. What I *can* tell you is that I did not have the usual degree of control I normally have when planning a mission of this type. To a certain extent, Ripley, you and I are both caught in the middle here." He ran a hand over his scrub of hair. "Now I'm sorry about what happened out there, but don't regard me as your enemy. I'm just a soldier doing my job, and those Marines were good soldiers doing *their* jobs."

There was a long silence as Ripley gazed at Williams. Finally, she softened a bit. "All right Colonel," she said. "This is what happened. When we arrived at LV-426, the colony was deserted. The platoon went into the command module, *Hadley's Hope*, and found no one except this little girl who was hiding. The colonists were located by their personal data transmitters; the aliens had brought them all over to the atmospheric processing station where they built their nest. The Marines had no idea what they were walking into, Colonel; there were dozens of aliens, and it was a running firefight to escape. Only a few Marines made it out of there, and we had to summon the other drop ship from the *Sulaco* by remote. The aliens' activity at the processing station caused it to explode. Hicks, Bishop, this little girl and I were lucky to escape with our lives."

Williams turned and looked into the distance with a dark expression on his face. He was silent for several moments, his jaw clenched. Finally, he turned around and faced Ripley. "Thank you Ripley. I look forward to the debriefing."

Without waiting for an answer he walked away, leaving Ripley blinking with a combination of surprise and disgust.

THREE

"You have got to be *kidding* me," Ripley exclaimed. "Do you *seriously* expect me to believe that Carter Burke was acting all by himself, without company approval?"

McMaster, a heavyset man wearing a fine tailored suit, sat back in his chair at the head of the long table in the conference room. He had a round, clean shaven face and a bald head that rose above a thin layer of gray hair like rock above a timberline. As head of security and logistics at Weyland-Yutani, he occupied a position just under the board of directors, but as a longtime company insider, his influence in the company was pervasive.

Ripley sat at the other end of the large table which was covered with sheets of paper, empty coffee cups, a couple of ashtrays with the remains of cigarettes, and half filled glasses of water. On one wall of the low-ceilinged conference room was a video screen with a map of the colony (called *Hadley's Hope* by its now deceased denizens), with continuously scrolling data on one side. Seated around the table were board members, company security, insurance adjusters and a representative of the Interstellar Commerce Commission, all of whom looked decidedly unenthusiastic, some even outright hostile by Ripley's testimony. Notably absent were representatives of the military.

Ripley felt a familiar weary resignation. She had related the whole story three times, constantly interrupted with requests for clarification from McMaster's aides, who viewed her answers with skepticism. Despite the knowledge that the truth would avail her nothing, she felt a familiar anger rising again. *Deja vu*, anyone?

McMaster seemed to be searching for patience. "Well as I've already explained, we have gone over all the data retrieved from the *Sulaco* including the colony logs. There is *no evidence* that Carter Burke sent a request to the colony to investigate any derelict spaceship." He looked at her expectantly; *are you satisfied yet?*

She looked back at him darkly. "The document exists. I read it myself in the command center of the colony."

"There is *no evidence* of such a document, Lieutenant Ripley," one of the board members stated with a trace of exasperation. She was a thin, fussy looking woman with severe, short hair and wore a suit more severe than her current expression.

Ripley folded her arms. "Well isn't that convenient."

One of McMaster's aides reached over to the ashtray and picked up a cigarette, taking a puff. "There's no need for sarcasm. All of us just want to get to the bottom of what happened out there. A lot of lives were lost, not to mention an incredibly expensive atmospheric processing station."

Ripley's eyes narrowed. "I really don't *care* about your processing station. What concerns *me* are the actions of a company representative which caused the deaths of 158 people, plus a whole platoon of soldiers. Burke used *my* testimony to send the colonists out there *without even warning them*. Conveniently, the company has no knowledge about this at all. You'll forgive me if I find that extremely hard to believe."

"Ripley," McMaster said, "As far as we can tell, the colonists acted *alone* on LV-426. It is *their* recklessness that caused the destruction of the colony and the processing station. Now I can understand how you must feel—"

"I don't think you can." Ripley interjected. She knew escalating the conversation would not aid her in the credibility department but she was beyond caring. "I have almost lost my life more times than I can count because of company actions, first on the *Nostromo*, then on *this* mission, a mission where Carter Burke, a representative of Weyland-Yutani, tried to actively kill Rebecca Jorden and I."

One of the board members, a thin man with slicked back hair spoke up. "Are you saying the company is *culpable* in the deaths of these colonists and these *alleged* attempts on your life? Because that is a very serious charge."

Ripley turned to face him, refusing to be intimidated. "I'm saying that the company has been trying to get their hands on one of these creatures for a very long time. The *Nostromo* was diverted *specifically* to pick up one of these things, and before we set out from Earth, our science officer was replaced with an artificial person to make sure that we did that."

McMaster remained unimpressed. "Well unfortunately, we only have your word about what transpired on LV-426".

"Not just *my* word," Ripley responded archly. "You also have the words of Corporal Hicks, Bishop, and one scared little girl who survived the alien infestation and watched her entire family get wiped out. You're not going to be able to cover this up quite so easily this time."

McMaster turned to one of his aides, and said, "Hendricks, where are we with that?"

The aide named Hendricks, a sleepy-eyed thin man with a rumpled suit, said in an almost bored fashion. "The testimony of a young child is simply not admissible, I'm afraid. The military has not been able to obtain the testimony of Corporal Hicks because he is undergoing surgery for his injuries; they will conduct their own investigation when he recovers. As far as Bishop, with the extent of injuries that he suffered, the med techs have determined that his core memory systems have been severely compromised. It's doubtful that we will be able to get much useful testimony out of him." He sat back and regarded Ripley blandly.

McMaster made a this-is-too-much gesture from the other end of the table. "Ripley, given your previously demonstrated hostility towards the company, your credibility is subject to question on this point. There is no evidence - *none* - tying Burke to the chain of events out there, and in light of your previous actions, the company just cannot take your word for it. Not without evidence."

Ripley's voice dropped twenty degrees. "My actions."

"Your destruction of the *Nostromo*, for one. Your demonstrated hostility to the company for another, and your compromised psychological state. Now we appreciate your going out there as an advisor, and we're sorry for what you've gone through, but you have to understand that the situation was caused by the *colonists' own actions*. The company has no claim against you; in fact we're in your debt for saving Rebecca Jorden and Corporal Hicks."

Ripley sighed, facing a sea of hostile faces. Once again, she was wasting her time; nothing she said would make any difference because the conclusion had already been reached. The inquest was a required bureaucratic step to prove the company was covering all the bases, taking the matter seriously, on top of things. In other words, it was a show, with the conclusion already determined.

She sat down heavily at the end of the table. "What about my flight officer's license? I was told that if I went, it would be reinstated."

There was an uncomfortable silence. The member of the Interstellar Commerce Commission leaned back and asked casually, "Did Burke tell you that?"

Ripley didn't reply; she had her answer.

McMaster felt the need to clarify. "If Burke told you that, he wasn't authorized to do so. I'm sorry, but under the circumstances we can't reinstate your ICC license at this time. Not until the review is finished. At that time the issue can be re-examined."

Ripley felt thoroughly disgusted. "Well then what can I say. You asked for my testimony and I gave it to you. Are we done here?"

McMaster looked around the conference table. "Does anyone have any additional questions for the witness before we begin deliberations?" No one spoke. Most of the people seated at the table looked bored. Satisfied, McMasters looked at Ripley. "Very well. Lieutenant Ripley, if you will excuse us, the inquest will now begin its deliberations."

Ripley hauled herself to her feet and walked out of the conference room.

■ ■ ■

The deliberations were brief; she did not have long to wait in the cramped lounge in the next compartment.

McMaster looked around the table, his gaze lingering on Ripley at the other end. "After considering all of the data retrieved from the colony, the *Sulaco*, internal company databases and the testimony of Lieutenant First Class Ellen Louise Ripley, it is the conclusion of this inquest that the destruction of the colony and the atmospheric processing station Baker-Seven was the direct result of the recklessness and incompetence of the colonists, an unknown number of whom ventured into the derelict spacecraft on LV-426 without authorization or sufficient preparation. It is these actions, *and these actions alone*, which caused the chain of events which led to the unfortunate events at this colony.

"The origins of the derelict spacecraft cannot be determined at this time. However, sufficient evidence exists to verify the hostile and destructive nature of the alien species described by Lieutenant Ripley in her testimony prior to the commencement of this mission. The board of inquiry finds that Lieutenant Ripley has fulfilled her agreement to act as an advisor, and the board wishes to express gratitude for her actions in helping rescue one of the colonists, Rebecca Jorden, and the only surviving Colonial Marine, Corporal Dwayne Hicks. Any and all sanctions against Lieutenant First Class Ellen Ripley are hereby dismissed without prejudice.

"At this time, absent further exculpatory information, it has been proven to the board's satisfaction that the sole responsibility for the series of events on LV-426 rests with the colonists, and their financial designees, with compensation for company losses to be calculated and remitted at a later time. The board wishes to thank everyone for their participation in this inquest, and remind *everyone* that strict non-disclosure agreements are in place for these hearings and the information contained within. No information from this inquest is to be discussed or disseminated without specific written permission from Weyland-Yutani. Violators are subject to criminal and civil penalties." He looked pointedly at Ripley. "Ripley, are we clear on this point?"

Ripley nodded dully.

Satisfied, McMaster nodded. "Thank you everyone. This inquest is hereby adjourned."

People around the table got up, gathering papers, stuffing them into satchels and briefcases, stubbing out cigarettes. With a sense of weary disgust salted with anger, Ripley got up and made her way towards the exit of the conference room. McMaster met her at the door with what he probably imagined was a kindly smile.

"I know it seems like we're unsympathetic to everything you've endured, but that's really not true. The company is not as callous as you believe. We care very much about what happened to those colonists; all we want to do is get to the truth."

Ripley said nothing, looking at him with a neutral expression.

"I have an offer for you," he went on. "Obviously we can't reinstate your flight officer's license under the current circumstances, but I can get you your old job back, before you went on this mission. You'd have some gainful employment, and I may even be able to pull some strings and get you a nicer place to live. We really want to show our gratitude for everything you've done. What do you say?"

Ripley was silent for a moment, then stepped closer, her eyebrows coming together like a thundercloud. "I don't ever want to have anything to do with Weyland-Yutani again." she said flatly. "You and the company just stay the hell away from me, you got that?"

Before McMaster could answer, Ripley turned and ducked out of the conference room and out of sight.

■ ■ ■

"Is that the ship?" Newt asked.

"It sure is," Ripley answered. She looked through the large window at the transit shuttle that would take her and Newt back to the surface from space dock; because it was docked just outside, she could only see part of the hull, which showed evidence of heavy use. There were discolorations and pitting on its surface, and evidence that some of its hull plating had been replaced.

Around them, people stood waiting to board, nursing coffee cups, chatting in low tones, shifting their carry-on bags from one shoulder to the other. The passengers who had already arrived at the spacedock had deplaned hours earlier, and now that the ship had been inspected, refueled and cleaned it was minutes from accepting a new cargo of people.

The concourse was crowded; spaciousness was an expensive premium on a space station. The ceiling was low, the corridors narrow with indirect lighting from ceiling and floor vents, the better to see out of the large viewports that looked out over the planet below, currently blocked by the shuttle. Small kiosks were selling snacks and other sundries for travelers, and on one of the bulkheads several large view screens displayed schedule, news and weather information. On the walls, in a half-hearted attempt to make the concourse more welcoming, were images of the earliest space shuttles, such as the *Atlantis*, *Challenger* and *Europa*. The air was stale and badly filtered, accented by the aroma of perspiration; it would be good to breathe fresh air again.

Newt, holding Ripley's hand, looked around wonderingly. "Are all these people going home too?" she asked.

Ripley looked down with a smile. "Yes, honey, just like us."

The speakers embedded in the ceiling crackled. "Attention all passengers: boarding will now commence for flight 7185 to the New Horizon spaceport. At this time, please proceed through the airlock where attendants will direct you to your assigned seating. Please have your identification, boarding passes and ICC Quarantine documents ready for inspection."

The passengers began moving forward slowly, forming into a single line as they passed through the open airlock. Ripley held Newt's hand as she led her over the wide threshold and into the entryway of the shuttle, where she was met by a smiling female attendant, who lit up upon seeing the little girl. "Well, hello, sweetheart, what's *your* name?"

"Newt," she answered shyly.

The woman examined the documents Ripley handed over. "We don't get many children on these flights. Welcome aboard." She gave Newt a warm smile. "Now if you need *anything*, you just let me know, all right?"

Newt nodded doubtfully. Looking at Ripley, the flight attendant said, "Looks like your seats have been upgraded to first class."

Ripley frowned. "Upgraded?"

She smiled. "Yes, you're going home in style. Your seats are right down the steps, in section bravo; seventeen and eighteen. Enjoy your flight." She beamed at them.

Nodding warily, Ripley led Newt through a pair of thick pressure doors, currently open, down a short flight of stairs and into the passenger compartment. There were three rows of high-backed lounge seats separated by two narrow isles, four seats per row. People were stowing their bags into the overhead bins, taking off jackets, settling into their seats. There were no windows; the trip through the atmosphere and the heat of reentry made that impractical for a commercial passenger ship. Once the shuttle departed, the inside walls of the shuttle would display virtual windows that would give passengers a view of the trip, fed by external cameras. The ceiling as well would display a moving starfield, giving the impression of riding in a ship with a transparent hull. For now, the walls and ceiling were a soothing off-white color.

Ripley helped settle Newt into her seat beside the slightly curved wall before settling in herself. The seats were wide and luxurious, quite a difference from the *Sulco's* armored personnel carrier or even bridge console seats she was used to. The armrests had controls which activated virtual reality goggles in the seat pockets so passengers could view movies or play games during the trip. Flight attendants were working the cabin, helping passengers secure their four-point restraint harnesses. Once Newt had been secured, Ripley secured her harness, looking up as a tall man ducked into the row and had a seat beside her.

It was Colonel Williams.

FOUR

Ripley froze for a moment while shouldering into her harness. He was not in military uniform; rather he was wearing crisply pressed dark colored slacks and a long sleeve silk dress shirt. He turned to face her and smiled, a genuine smile which Ripley found hard to interpret.

"Hello, Ripley." He leaned forward to see Newt. "Hello Rebecca, it's good to see you again." Newt waved back tentatively.

Ripley watched him warily. "Do we have you to thank for the upgrade?"

Williams nodded, securing his harness. "Yes. We didn't have much time to talk aboard the *Sulaco*."

"Colonel, I—"

"Let me be blunt, Ripley. I know you don't trust me. There's no good reason I can think of why you should. Not after everything you've been through, especially not after the way the company treated you. If I was in your shoes, I wouldn't trust me either."

A voice came through the overhead speakers. "Hello everyone, this is Captain Stansfield; I want to welcome you aboard Flight 7185 to Earth, New Horizons spaceport. Our flight time will be approximately four hours, and the current ground temperature at New Horizons is twenty-six degrees celsius. Once we're underway you'll get some pretty good views of our reentry, so settle back, enjoy the ride and on behalf of your flight crew, thank you for traveling with us today. Flight attendants, secure cabin and prepare for departure from space dock."

Williams shifted in his seat so he was more directly facing Ripley. Lowering his voice, he continued, "The military doesn't know I'm here. They don't know that I'm talking to you, and they would probably bring me up on charges if they found out. I took some leave I saved up so I could be on this flight."

Ripley was unpersuaded. "Why *are* you talking to me, Colonel?"

He looked rueful. "I'm not here in any official capacity. At some point I hope you will be comfortable calling me Jerome, but I realize that will take time."

The intercom crackled above them. "Docking latches have been released; separation is complete."

The cabin lights lowered and the off-white walls seemed to dissolve, replaced with a regular series of large windows which offered a view of the space dock as it drifted away from them. Beyond were the twinkling lights of distant stars. Above, the ceiling was replaced with slowly moving stars as the shuttle swung around. Newt, enthralled, turned in her seat to watch. Freed from the artificial gravity of the space station, Ripley felt her body become weightless, her straps securing her to the seat. The effect was, as always relaxing, if a bit disorienting.

Williams, no longer affected by the novelty of space flight, continued. "You and Hicks are the only ones who can shed light on what happened out there, and Hicks is not yet able to provide any testimony."

"How is he? What's his prognosis?" An unsecured pen floated by languidly above them, weightless. One of the flight attendants, wearing special footwear, plucked it from the air and moved on.

Williams smiled with what looked like relief. "He's stable, and he should make a full recovery...eventually. He's still in stasis, in fact, aboard this shuttle. I'm bringing him to one of the best hospitals in the area to recover."

She nodded. It made sense; the medical facilities in space dock were not designed for long-term care, but rather the kinds of injuries sustained while working in and on space stations. "I'm really glad to hear that. Hicks is a good man."

"Yes. Yes he is."

"But the fact remains I can't tell you anything, Colonel. I'm under a strict non-disclosure agreement from the company." Lowering her voice, she said, "I'm going to adopt Rebecca, and if I violate the agreement, the company could find a way to stop the process. She'd end up in foster care."

He looked grim. "I wouldn't put it past them, the bastards."

Ripley studied him, confused. She had assumed the military and the company were pretty much in lockstep, but it appeared that Williams was acting independently, without the knowledge or oversight of either. "I can't figure you out, Colonel."

"Jerome." He smiled reassuringly.

"Okay, *Jerome*. What are you after? You already knew that I wouldn't be able to discuss any of this."

He looked down for a moment, nodding, a gesture of humility. "I know. I guess I was hoping to start building enough trust so that you could tell me, when you're ready. You and I have more in common with this situation than you might think."

She looked at him skeptically. "How so?"

He was silent for a moment, as if trying to select the right words. The stars moved slowly above them in the darkened cabin, as if they were in a planetarium. The quiet of the heavily insulated compartment was underlined by dozens of conversations in low tones. Finally Williams said, "One of the colonists was my daughter-in-law."

Ripley's stunned reaction gave way to a wave of sympathy. "I'm sorry," she said quietly, meaning it. There was an uncomfortable silence. "What was her name?"

Williams looked less like a ramrod straight military officer now, and more like a grieving father. A slight shiny glaze appeared in his eyes. "Audrey. Audrey Lynn Bowers. She was a geological chemist. She had been so excited about being posted to *Hadley's Hope* by the company, she put off marriage, having kids, everything to take advantage of the opportunity."

Ripley could think of nothing to say.

He leaned in a bit closer. "The company has not shared any information with the military. At all. And my superiors have made it clear that I am not to ask any questions until the results of the investigation are released - an investigation I've been shut out of."

"The company has told the military *nothing*?"

Williams shook his head. "The only reason I know that Audra is dead is because you told me on the *Sulaco*."

Ripley was thunderstruck. For several moments she couldn't speak. Finally she said, "How long do you think the company is going to be able to keep the deaths of so many people from coming out?"

"Obviously they won't be able to hide this forever. My guess is that they're playing for time so they can build a plausible explanation that shields them from any responsibility."

"Well they'll get the full story once Hicks recovers. He was there too."

He looked bitter. "If he's allowed to testify."

Ripley looked down thoughtfully for several minutes, her thoughts jumbled. "Have you told your wife yet?"

Williams slumped, looking defeated, and again Ripley felt badly for him. "Not yet," he answered. "This situation has put me into a terrible dilemma."

"What do you mean?"

He looked up again, his eyes sorrowful. "Right now, you, Rebecca, Hicks and I are the only ones that know they are all dead. *I* only know because you told me before the company could shut you up. I'm not even supposed to *have* this knowledge. If I tell my wife what happened, that her little girl is dead..."

Ripley nodded, understanding. "She won't be able to *tell* anyone, because it's classified. If she *does*, you'll be brought up on charges."

"Exactly right. The alternative is to lie to her, which is worse."

Ripley looked down and said with bitter regret, "What a terrible position to be in." She would not have believed that she could hate the company more, yet here she was. "I wish I could help, Jerome, but I have a little girl to think of now. I can't do anything that would put her at risk."

Williams was about to respond when the captain's voice came over the intercom. "Ladies and gentlemen, this is your captain speaking. We have been given clearance for reentry, so at this time we ask that you make sure your harnesses are securely fastened and as tight as you can make them. It's going to be a little bumpy, as usual. Flight attendants, secure the cabin and initiate inertial dampers."

There was a murmur of activity as passengers checked their harnesses; for most of them, this was a routine trip. After securing Newt's harness and tightening her own, she was firmly restrained in her seat, with a limited range of motion. The virtual windows and ceiling dissolved back into the soft off-white color of the cabin interior; seeing the flaming resistance as the ship passed through the atmosphere was something that passengers preferred not to witness.

"How many times have you made this trip?" Ripley asked, turning her head to look at him, her shoulders strapped firmly to the back of her seat.

Williams smiled ruefully. "Often enough."

The shuttle began to vibrate, and in moments was shaking quite roughly as the bottom of the shuttle experienced the resistance of the atmosphere. The mood of the passengers was relaxed, with only a few small conversations here and there. With nothing to see, there was nothing to do but wait until the turbulence subsided, which it did after about five minutes. As the vibrations subsided, the captain clicked on the intercom.

"Okay folks, we are through the atmosphere. It should be smooth sailing, there are no major weather systems between us and New Horizons. The current ground temperature is sixty-eight degrees Celsius with slightly overcast skies. Flight attendants will be around to serve some refreshments, and you are free to move about the cabin. We expect to be reaching the surface in about two hours."

Williams loosened his harness, and Ripley did the same, helping Newt. "How are you doing kiddo?"

Newt gave her a thumbs up.

Williams leaned forward, clearly having more to say. "There's something else that I wanted to tell you, while you're a...captive audience." He smiled and Ripley returned the smile politely. He grew serious again and seemed to struggle for words for a few minutes, then said, "I would like to do whatever I can to help Rebecca, to help *you*. No strings attached, honest. Rebecca is the only survivor of the colony, and helping her will make me feel better. I know my wife would feel the same."

Ripley felt awkward. "That's very gracious, but—"

He held up a hand. "Don't worry, I'm not going to insert myself into your life, that's not my style. But I want you to know that I am someone you and Rebecca will be able to count on if you need help. I hope you will accept it, and I hope from time to time you'll let me visit so I can see how she's doing. You absolutely have the right to refuse, of course."

He struggled a little bit and then said, "I'm not being very articulate about this, I know, but now that Audra is gone, it makes me feel better to have someone to think about, someone I can help protect. You'll make an excellent mother, but in time, as you grow to trust me, I hope you will see me as maybe...an uncle of sorts. I know my wife would feel the same way. Does this make any sense at all?"

Ripley nodded sympathetically. "I understand...Jerome. I can't think of a reason why you wouldn't be able to see her in the future. But first I have to complete the adoption process and that is by no means assured."

He seemed ready with an answer. "Well, I think I can help with that. I'm going to give you the contact information of an excellent attorney who specializes in family and adoptive law. His name is Herbert Lindstrom. He and I went to college together and he's a good man. He'll make sure that your adoption of Rebecca is successful. I'm going to give him a call and tell him to expect you."

Ripley smiled, unexpectedly moved by this gesture. "I could definitely use all the help I can get."

Williams looked at her earnestly. "Does that mean you will let me help you, from time to time?"

She nodded, smiling.

FIVE

In fifty-seven years, while she was in dreamless stasis, the world she had known no longer existed.

Ripley stood on a conveyor walk, a moving walkway which carried her through a transparent tube which connected the various skyscrapers of the city like a network of spiderwebs. One could travel to a number of buildings in different parts of the city without ever having to return to ground level or engage the services of private air car transports. The conveyor walk network had oval-shaped openings thirty feet wide through which people could enter and depart by stepping on a slower moving walkway. Protruding from the ceiling at regular intervals were video screens that announced what section pedestrians were in, as well as upcoming exits and news broadcasts. The clear tubes through which pedestrians traveled offered striking views of the tops of the city, with the gleaming spires of skyscrapers and the endless river of air car traffic that flowed like a bloodstream.

The conveyor walk that Ripley was on was lightly populated at this hour of the early evening; the walkway overlooked the city skyline which was aglow with the receding light of the sun as it made its way towards the horizon, a flaming orange ball partially obscured by a haze of clouds and pollution.

When she had first begun moving around the city, she had marveled at how many changes had taken place in the fifty-seven years she had been in stasis. The conveyor walk transit network, for one, the explosion of air cars that moved through the city, carrying people and cargo from place to place, the newer, tall buildings much higher than the ones she had

remembered when she left Earth to go on the ill-fated assignment aboard the *Nostromo*. The city was more crowded, the music was different, the clothing styles had definitely changed...with all the changes it seemed almost like a foreign civilization.

Tonight, however, her mind was a million miles away, heedless of the spectacular view scrolling by beside her. Again and again she found herself thinking of the colonists and about Russ and Sandra Jorden, Newt's parents, about a tremendous loss of talent and life, all because of the greed of the company in general, and Carter Burke in particular.

Her attention was drawn to an approaching viewscreen mounted in the ceiling of the tube, currently playing a commercial with annoyingly bombastic music, the sound growing louder as she approached. A booming, confident voice proclaimed, "Building a better future for citizens of Earth on off-world colonies, Weyland-Yutani has exciting opportunities for families looking for adventure and new avenues for prosperity." Images of smiling families and glamorous planetary landscapes accompanied the absurdly proud voice. "NOW is the time to take advantage of these exciting new opportunities..."

The view screen passed by over her head, the sound fading as the walkway brought her further away from it. Seeing the commercial rekindled her smoldering rage at Carter Burke, which burned in the background of her emotions like the pilot light of a gas stove. Even though Burke was dead, she was still furious with him, and she supposed she always would be. He had taken information she supplied at the previous inquest, and without telling her, had used it to try to enrich himself and the company. Then he had actually tried to *kill* her, along with Newt, to achieve his objectives. *And he almost succeeded!* she thought with outraged amazement. A small, malignant part of her wished that she could have finished off Burke herself, even though she knew his demise from one of the aliens was much worse. Poetic justice if there was such a thing.

The walkway became an up-escalator as the tube transit system brought passengers to a higher level of the city, and it was then that she noticed a man in a dark blue trench coat, trying to look nonchalant, but watching her, several steps below. He was medium height and thin, with prominent, dark sideburns and neatly trimmed but thick dark brown hair. His hands rested in the pockets of the trench coat, and as she studied him, he quickly looked away as if he was interested in the view. It occurred to her that she had noticed him before. In fact, the more she thought about it, the more convinced she was that she had seen him as she traveled through the city.

She was being followed.

By whom? The company? It made the most sense; they were keeping tabs on her.

The escalator became a level walkway as she reached a higher level. Up ahead was an exit to this part of the city; people were stepping onto and off of the slower-moving surface that led to the exit, a large oval threshold thirty feet long, blinking amber lights in its thick frame. Ripley moved quickly over to the slower walkway and ducked out of the conveyor tube, losing herself in the crowd. She looked back, but the man in the blue trench coat was gone.

■ ■ ■

A single line of gray smoke undulated upward from the cigarette resting in the jade green ashtray, gradually dispersing in the fancy, wood-paneled office. The owner of the cigarette sat in an expensive high-backed executive chair behind an enormous wooden desk reading a data tablet. He was in his late 50s, rotund, balding, and had a pair of half spectacles perched halfway on a round nose that bore evidence of too much whiskey. His eyes were deep set and guarded by two bushy eyebrows that looked as if they had never been trimmed. His short, jet black hair was accented with white strands, his suit was flawlessly tailored, and there were two very expensive-looking rings on his fingers.

No outside sounds reached the deep silence of the office as Ripley sat in the chair in front of his desk waiting. Through the tall, narrow windows was the constellation of lit windows of a busy city after dark. The office, with the framed diplomas and large paintings in ornate frames, had the atmosphere of a library at a very old college, a place where serious, important things took place.

At last he put the data terminal down on his desk and sat back. "Well," he said with admiration, "that is one incredible story. I can't say I have ever read a more interesting petition for adoption than this one."

"Every word of it is true Mr. Lindstrom," Ripley answered earnestly.

Lindstrom smiled, a twinkle of amazement in his eyes. "Oh, I don't doubt it."

"What do you think my chances are of being accepted as Rebecca's adopted mother?"

He thought for a moment, the bushy eyebrows descending. "Well, Russ and Anne Jorden have no surviving relatives, if you can believe that. Russ Jorden's parents are both deceased, and he had no siblings. His wife was adopted, and apparently had no sisters or other living relatives that I've been able to find."

"So there would be no one to take care of this little girl."

Lindstrom cleared his throat. "Quite right. No one wants to see Rebecca dumped into an institution, especially after what she has suffered. Adoptions in cases like this are usually straightforward, however it is usually a blood relative or friend of the family who makes the petition for adoption, but in this case there are none. The fact that you are unrelated adds a wrinkle to the application."

A shadow of worry crossed Ripley's face. "But there's no one else. I'm ready to take care of her now."

"Generally speaking," Lindstrom continued, "the agency looks for a few things in making a decision, particularly for a non-relative. One, of course, is gainful employment."

"Which I have. I'm working for Consolidated Freight Logistics."

Lindstrom nodded. "Yes, that does satisfy one of the requirements. The other requirement, of course, is a place to live."

"I've recently transitioned out of spacedock quarters and I have an apartment."

Lindstrom hunched forward and laced his hands on the top of the desk. "In the same neighborhood you were in before you left? There's no way the agency will approve your adoption request if you are going to live in that part of town. They won't even consider it."

"Well then I will find a *better* apartment." Ripley answered firmly.

"I can certainly see you are determined," Lindstrom said with a wry smile. He let a few moments pass, as if saving a surprise. "I think I may have a solution to this, however."

He picked up the data terminal and swiped through several files. "Now according to the records, Rebecca's parents had an apartment they left behind, in the Northport Heights section, definitely a better part of the city. It's also completely paid off, which is very good. The property would normally go to the next of kin; Rebecca would be the new owner. As her legal guardian, you would have a place to live where you could take care of her properly." He smiled like an uncle about to bestow a present to a favorite nephew. "I think I can convince the courts to accept transfer of ownership to you and Rebecca, which would satisfy the housing requirement."

"That would be *wonderful* Mr. Lindstrom," Ripley responded earnestly. "I have to wonder, though: if the Jordens were doing so well to be able to afford such a nice apartment, why did they go to an offworld colony?"

Lindstrom sat back and smiled casually. "I've seen it happen before...people get in a rut. I imagine they were looking for some excitement, a new adventure for their children, to see what else was out there. I've known quite a few people who are well-off who volunteered to join an offworld colony, just to get away from the same old routine." He turned serious for a moment. "There's still the matter of the aftermath with the Colonial Marines and Weyland-Yutani, but in the interim I think it's a safe bet that your request to adopt Rebecca will be granted."

Ripley felt a wave of relief that almost consumed her. "What is the next step?"

With a trace of importance he answered, "I'll file the paperwork by end of business day tomorrow, and barring any unforeseen circumstances, you will be Rebecca's new mother by next week. I'll provide you with all the documentation, and, of course, the door codes."

"Thank you, thank you so much." Ripley realized she was gushing. "Listen, about your fee. I can't pay you the whole amount, but I can pay you in installments--"

He held up a hand. "You don't have to worry about the fee. It's all been taken care of."

Ripley frowned. "It *has*...? Who is paying? Jerome Williams?"

"Normally that would be confidential, but he has authorized me to disclose his identity if you asked. All legal fees related to the adoption of Rebecca have been paid by Dwayne Hicks."

Ripley sat back in her chair, thunderstruck. "Hicks." she whispered.

■ ■ ■

The military hospital was in a towering glass and concrete tower that resembled a large vertical fortress, befitting its purpose. Jutting from the fortieth floor was a large, enclosed horizontal platform that overlooked the city and served as the garden and arboretum. The area was filled with plants, a few trees and a large central fountain with a stone sculpture of a trio of soldiers in the center, a place where patients could sit and watch the skyline, albeit a view tainted with a haze of ozone, pollution and the smoke from distant factories. The grounds were currently lightly populated with soldiers recovering from their injuries. A couple of soldiers with missing limbs were sitting in antigrav chairs, looking at the skyline, lost in their own thoughts.

Ripley and Newt emerged from a doorway of the building that opened onto the garden. Holding Newt's hand, Ripley said, "She said he's over here somewhere."

Together they walked through the garden to where a lone figure was sitting in a chair gazing out at the streamlined Art Deco skyline of the city, slightly shrouded by a dramatic haze. He wore an olive drab bathrobe over clean white pajamas and slippers.

Ripley came up behind him and said with a smile, "How's my favorite soldier?"

Dwayne Hicks turned around and broke into a grin. "Hicks!" Newt exclaimed, throwing herself at him, arms open wide. Surprised and pleased, he hugged her back clumsily with his one good arm. "Hey there," he said, "it's great to see you too."

He was still heavily bandaged, with white gauze wrapping his left arm and part of his chest. A sterile white eye patch was secured over one eye and there were residual cuts and scratches on his face. Part of his hair had been shaved off as well, but he had not lost his laconic, lopsided grin. He looked up at Ripley. "How did you get in here? I've been told I'm not allowed any visitors."

"I can get through a little security," Ripley answered with a smile.

He grinned. "Yes, you definitely know how to take care of yourself. You've proven that pretty well."

"How are you doing, Dwayne?"

Hicks looked mildly amused and reflective at the same time. "Well, my days as a Colonial Marine are over."

She looked sad. "I'm sorry. How are you recovering?"

He ran a hand absentmindedly over his chest. "The skin replacement therapy is going pretty well, they have almost all of the burn tissue replaced with regenerated skin. And it looks like they're going to be able to save my eye. I have one more operation left on it. Those bastards really did a number on me."

"I'm really glad that the treatments are going well," Ripley said earnestly. "What are you going to do when you've recovered?"

He looked rueful. "I'll be given an honorable discharge, and a sizable separation settlement, as long as I don't say anything about what happened. They're putting a lid on the whole operation."

Ripley's face clouded. "The cover-up is beginning. At the inquest, the company told me not to talk about it either. Can the company really suppress the military's own investigation of what happened?"

"You have to understand, Ellen, Weyland-Yutani supplies the military with a lot of weapons platforms and technology. Plus, they are extremely politically connected. The military will do whatever it takes to keep the weapons coming."

"So basically there's no one left to challenge the company's version of what happened." Ripley said grimly.

"Pretty much."

Newt wandered around the garden, looking at the plants and watching the water splash from the statue of soldiers into the pool below. Looking around to make sure their conversation was not being overheard, Ripley said in a lower voice, "Right after we docked, after quarantine,

two men from the company showed up before the military did. One of them disappeared into the ship for a few minutes. Colonel Williams was not happy at all about that.”

Hicks looked serious. “If I had to guess, I would say they were downloading the mission logs from the *Sulaco* and wiping the drive so that no one else could access them. That way they could tamper with the logs to make them say whatever they want.”

“About that...” Ripley responded with a sly smile. “Right before quarantine arrived, I downloaded all of the mission logs and correspondence from the colony and covered my tracks so no one would know.”

Hicks grinned, impressed. “You are really resourceful, I’ll give you that.” His expression darkened. “Make sure you put that data somewhere safe. Your life may depend on it.”

There was a silence as the two of them thought their separate thoughts. Finally, Ripley looked down for a moment, trying to decide on the right words. “Listen,” she said tentatively, “I really want to thank you for paying for the legal fees so I could adopt Newt.”

Hicks smiled warmly. “I knew that was a step you would take, and she needs a mother. I can’t think of a better mother to her than you would be. I also know that you can use all the friends you can get.”

“How did you know which lawyer I would be using to submit my application?”

“Colonel Williams told me. He was going to pay, but I wouldn’t let him. I insisted.” They both laughed quietly.

“Thank you, Dwayne. Really. I wish there was a way to repay you.”

“Maybe there is.” Looking uncharacteristically unsure of himself for a moment, he said, “Take me out to dinner when I get discharged and we’ll call it even.”

Ripley smiled, a genuine, warm smile. “You have a deal.”

SIX

The door slid open with a soft, reassuring whoosh, revealing Newt and Ripley in the hallway. Ripley carried a small animal crate in which her cat, Jones, was securely contained. Indicative of Jones’ experiences traveling aboard the *Nostromo*, the cat was not fazed by the carrier in the slightest; he looked out of it placidly, patiently waiting to be set free.

Ripley looked down at Newt and said, “This is it, this is going to be our new home. Are you ready?”

Newt looked up at Ripley and nodded solemnly. The last time she had been in this apartment, she had been part of a whole family. Now she was the only one left.

They stepped inside, and Ripley set the cat carrier down, opening it and letting Jones stroll out, which he did with the bored, languid pace of an animal with little interest in anything and all the time in the world. He padded slowly up the entranceway, sniffing things.

Ripley looked around, taking it in. The entryway had a low, dark ceiling and walls trimmed with weathered stone panels. As soon as they stepped inside, soft, indirect lights blinked on from recesses in the ceiling, giving the impression of an underground chamber. Beyond the short entryway was the kitchen on the right. It was compact but well furnished, with

the latest appliances, a dual sink, and overhead cabinets trimmed in the stone motif, looking like panels from an ancient Inca temple. Photographs of the Jordens adorned the refrigerator and cabinets; pictures of Newt and Timmy, pictures of the family on various outings. More recessed lighting in the ceiling provided a soft, indirect illumination. The kitchen had a bar counter that faced the dining area, with two bar stools. The dining area was on the right side of the apartment and featured a large, polished stone table, with six high back chairs, looking like the council chamber of a long lost but advanced society.

Beside the dining area was a doorway which led to several rooms, which Ripley assumed to be the bedrooms. Coming forward from the entranceway, beside the dining area, on the left, were three steps, framed by intricately carved and weathered stone columns, which led down into a sunken living room, putting the dining area at a higher level and which gave the effect of making the ceilings seem a little higher. The sunken living room had two very comfortable looking dark couches facing an interactive media table from which holographic programs and videos could be viewed. The opposite wall had another doorway to more rooms and a wall of bookshelves. At the back of the living room, furthest from the entrance, was a sliding glass door which opened up into a large balcony overlooking the city, which were now a nebula of small lighted windows of the surrounding buildings.

The apartment had obviously been designed and furnished by owners who possessed a sense of adventure and wanted to create an exotic, comforting environment. It wasn't a motif Ripley would have chosen, but she liked it at once just the same.

“How much of the apartment do you remember?” she asked quietly.

Newt said in a small voice, “This is where I lived before my old mommy and daddy took me and my brother Timmy to that planet.”

Ripley knelt and gently took her by the shoulders. “Newt, honey,” she said softly, “This is our home now and I will never leave you, just like I promised. It's okay to feel sad, it's okay to miss your brother and your mommy and daddy. We will get through it together, you and me, I promise.”

Newt, with big eyes, said in a quiet voice, “You're my mommy now.”

This time the tears would not be held back, and she hugged Newt fiercely. “Yes, sweetheart, I am.”

■ ■ ■

With Newt helping, they cooked a large dinner in the kitchen, with fresh fruits and vegetables; together they further bonded as Ripley cleaned and chopped, with Newt passing her what she needed. After so many years, after so long living aboard starships and eating condensed rations, it was comforting to be able to prepare her own meals the way she wanted, and she forgot how much she missed it. To her surprise, she had a voracious appetite and she and Newt ate heartily at the table in front of the kitchen while Jones feasted on a big bowl of wet cat food in the kitchen.

There was silence as they ate; eventually Newt began to look thoughtful, as if she was trying to figure something out. Presently she asked, "Did you ever have a little boy or girl?"

Ripley felt the ache of sadness at the memory of her now deceased daughter, Amanda Ripley-McClaren, who passed away two years ago at the age of sixty-six while Ripley was still in stasis after fleeing the *Nostromo*. Her Amy, her beautiful little girl to whom she had promised to be back for her eleventh birthday, had left no children. "Yes," she answered, trying to smile. "I did have a daughter once."

"Where is she?" Newt asked.

Ripley attempted to maintain a brave face for her new daughter. "She had a long life, and then she passed away while I was in stasis, waiting to be rescued."

In a smaller voice, Newt asked. "Do you miss her?"

A tear slipped from the corner of Ripley's eye. "Yes sweetheart. I miss her very much."

■ ■ ■

Later that night, Ripley lay on Newt's bed, with Newt securely tucked in under the covers in her bedroom. Jones lay curled up on the corner of the bed, dozing. She put down the storybook she had been reading, one of the books on Newt's bookshelf that Newt had asked her to read. Newt would grow accustomed to having someone to read to her at night before she turned the lights out, and Ripley would come to cherish these moments.

They lay in silence for a while, neither needing to talk.

"Mom?"

"Yes, sweetheart?"

"Are you careful?"

Ripley, realizing again how much this little girl had lost on that distant planet, and her struggle for some sort of stability, felt an ache deep within her. It was a stability that Ripley realized she was looking for as well. Ripley had been out in space for so long, had been in *stasis* for so long, that her sense of how to resume a normal life had melted away, like those fifty-seven years drifting in the *Nostromo's* lifeboat.

"Yes, Newt, I am very careful. Nothing is going to happen to me, I promise."

"That's what mommy and daddy said. I mean, my old mommy and daddy." She spoke in a small voice, almost regressing as she expressed her childhood fear of abandonment.

"And your mommy and daddy meant it when they said that." Ripley said quietly. "They were on a planet with monsters, but there are no monsters here. We are absolutely safe."

"So you're not going to go away?"

Ripley tightened her hug on Newt and said, "Newt, look at me." Newt looked up with large, vulnerable eyes. "I'm not going to leave you. Not ever. I will always be here for you."

Almost in relief, Newt hugged Ripley back, and the two of them sat for some time just enjoying the feeling of their closeness.

SEVEN

Later, after Newt was sound asleep (Jones had elected to stay with Newt, as if guarding her), Ripley wandered around the apartment, examining the things left behind by Newt's previous parents. Russ and Anne Jorden had been cultured; expensive looking paintings hung on the wall and exotic figurines sat on small end tables.

In an ornate wood cabinet, Ripley discovered a fine collection of liquor paired with crystal cocktail glasses, a silver ice bucket, coasters and other cocktail accessories. After considering it for a few moments, she removed a glass, dumped some ice into it and filled it with some liquor, a fine brand she would have had a hard time affording on her current salary. She was not a drinker in the usual sense of the word, but she felt that the first night in her new home, with her new daughter, merited some fine whiskey.

She stepped out of the apartment onto the balcony, which overlooked the evening city skyline. It was a constellation of lit windows from surrounding buildings, separated by wide canyons through which occasional air cars glided by like spectral, mechanical insects. Large view screens displayed constantly changing faces of cheerful people advertising products and services, throwing multi-colored light. In the distance, a river of air car traffic flowed between the buildings like a line of illuminated ants. She sipped her whiskey and looked over the edge of the balcony; she couldn't see the ground in the darkness far below.

Stepping back into the apartment, she went into one of the rooms opposite the bedrooms, obviously the study. There were bookshelves stocked with old books, more paintings on the walls and a comfortable looking wrap-around easy chair with an inset light in the headrest that faced a data terminal with a large screen. Settling into it (the inset light in the headrest came on automatically, providing a soft glow), she accessed the terminal and found that it was not password protected. The Jordens had expected to return from LV-426 and had not felt the need to secure it.

If she was going to be Newt's mother, she should learn as much about her previous parents as she could. She scrolled through the files and documents on the data terminal, at first feeling like she was intruding, then reminding herself that there may be information in here that would help her and Newt bond more effectively and help her become a better mother. In any event, she had effectively inherited this information, as Newt's legal guardian.

They were video files of Newt and her brother Timmy playing, the family out on various excursions, and lots of snapshots of a happy family together. Ripley watched them, her expression alternating between sad smiles and deep regret; it was obvious the Jordens were a happy, boisterous family.

She wandered idly through the other files, then saw something that made her sit up a little straighter. There was a folder containing video files that were dated this year, 2179, the same time Newt's parents had been stationed on LV-426. Frowning, she sat forward and opened up the folder.

There were three video files, marked with a random series of numbers. It appeared they had been sent from LV-426 using ICC relays, bypassing the comm relays controlled by the company.

Now why would the Jordens have done that?

Ripley thought about it for a moment. They didn't want to go through the company's comm networks, where the messages would have a high probability of being screened, maybe even intercepted. It must have been something pretty important, because video files of this size were not easy to relay all the way back to Earth.

With a sense of deep trepidation, Ripley opened the first file and sat back to watch.

The video opened with very shaky movements as the person holding it struggled to turn on the camera and get it pointed in the right direction. When it stabilized, the now familiar inhospitable environment of LV-426 appeared. Because the video was not being transmitted through the atmosphere, it was clear and sharp, with no radiation or atmospherics to degrade the picture. The camera must have had a pair of bi-directional microphones to pick up sound from both the subject and camera operator, because the voices were coming through clearly.

Standing in front of the camera was Newt's father, Russ Jorden, recognizable from the pictures Ripley had seen in the apartment. The person holding the camera must have been Newt's mother, Anne. Russ stood in front of large, deformed rock formations waiting for her to get ready, the wind howling with anguish beyond.

"Is it rolling?" he asked.

"We are live. Go ahead," said the off-camera voice, Anne Jorden.

Russ Jorden cleared his throat and spoke clearly, the furious winds muted by the rocks behind him. "Hi, this is Russ Jorden, and I'm here with my wife Anne Jorden, and this recording documents a claim we intend to file for salvage and mineral rights with Weyland-Yutani. In the background behind me you can see what appears to be an alien craft of some kind. We are going inside, and this video documents our claim and any discoveries we find." He paused, then said, "Did you get that?"

Anne Jorden answered, "I got it. How did you find out about this again? I want to get it on video."

Russ brightened. "Yes, great idea. Well, Al Simpson, the manager of *Hadley's Hope*, told me that some Weyland-Yutani bigshot named Burke wanted someone to check out these specific coordinates. High priority. Burke didn't give a reason, but from what Al told me, Burke was pretty insistent on sending someone here ASAP. So Al, you know how Al Simpson is, he doesn't ask questions, and he owes me a favor, so he tells me to go look. He also stated that anything we find out here is ours, and honey, I think we have hit the *mother lode*."

She moved the camera up, beyond her husband to reveal the spacecraft, partially obscured in the swirling dark blue mists. It was partially hidden by the rock formations, but rising up into the menacing, inky sky was an enormous wishbone-shaped craft with two thick cylindrical projections, angled upward, looking like outstretched arms. The rear of the craft was larger but obscured by the clouds, resting like the remains of a mammoth, malignant beast on a dark, hostile landscape.

"This is absolutely incredible," Russ exclaimed. "I've never seen anything like this in my life."

Anne Jorden said off-camera, "Let's get going. It's getting late."

A burst of static cut off the video and then resumed as the camera was started again. When the picture focused, it was clear they were standing directly next to the ship, beside a

huge oval opening in the hull surrounded by jagged rocks. The bottom of the hull must have sat an unknown number of meters beneath the surface.

Russ Jorden was again looking into the camera; the wind noise was not quite so loud here. "We are now preparing to enter the spacecraft; the ship appears to have been here for an exceptionally long time. These openings in the hull look intentional, not the result of any kind of damage. They seem to be ventilation ports of some kind."

"Or empty lifeboat hatches," Anne Jorden added off-camera. "Maybe the crew abandoned ship."

"It's possible; it definitely looks like it crashed instead of making a controlled landing." He looked into the blackness beyond the enormous opening, then back at the camera. Despite his initial enthusiasm, he seemed more cautious now. "Come on, let's go inside and see what we've got."

A burst of visual static as the recording was stopped, then restarted again. The camera slowly panned across the interior of an enormous, dark chamber, jiggling slightly as Anne Jorden attempted to keep it steady. The only source of illumination was a cold, meager light that filtered in through the ruptured top of the ship, where the planet's bright moon glowed with malevolence. It was quiet, like a crypt, insulated from the shrieking winds outside. The camera zoomed in on the figure on the raised platform.

Neither of them spoke. They were rendered speechless with awe.

Ripley watched the video, transfixed in spite of herself. This was what Kane, Dallas and Lambert had witnessed when they entered the ship fifty-seven years ago. She had remained aboard the *Nostramo*, and while she had reviewed the video they captured with their suits, the atmospheric interference had seriously degraded the image quality and made it hard to appreciate the magnitude of what they had discovered. This video, however, having been directly recorded, had much higher quality.

The chamber had walls that curved upward toward the top of the ship, more than 100 meters above where they stood, the ceiling shrouded in darkness. The walls were black and dull, heavily ribbed and textured with interlocking shapes that resembled bones and cartilage, as if a combination of the organic and mechanical. The floor had the same composition, the effect similar to the bottom deck of a cargo ship, with its conduits, pipes and uneven projections one would have to step over. In the center of this dark and gothic space was a round platform four to five meters high, with ribbed, cylindrical conduits extending out from the center, and on it sat the figure.

The figure was humanoid but absolutely not human, and reclined on some sort of couch or command chair; in fact it seemed to have grown out of the chair itself, motionless and looking like it was made of stone. It was very large; had the creature been standing it would have stood well over twelve meters tall. A series of external ribs encased its upper torso, attached to what looked like a spinal column that ran up the front of its torso and appeared to be attached to its face. In front of the figure was a massive, heavily textured cylindrical projection aimed at an upward angle, with ribbed and segmented piping, looking like a giant, sinister cannon. It seemed clear that the humanoid had controlled the projection, whatever its purpose might be.

At last Russ Jorden spoke, in a hushed voice. "We're in the interior of the derelict spacecraft, and we're looking at what appears to be one of the occupants of the ship, which I'm

guessing to be a pilot of some kind. He looks like he's been dead for a long time. I'm going to climb up onto the platform and get a closer look."

The camera jiggled and joggled as Anne Jorden climbed up behind her husband onto the platform. The humanoid rested in perpetual darkness; she flipped on the camera's light and carefully moved the lens over the prone alien figure lying in the chair.

The camera's light did not make the creature look any more eye pleasing; in fact the light enhanced the eerie nature of the creature, whose face was partially obscured by the spinal column shape that seemed melted into its face, which looked heavily deformed. Its mouth was open, as if in a long frozen scream of pain or anguish. There was an empty eye socket that looked bleakly off to the side.

"How long do you think he's been dead?" Anne Jorden whispered in the big silence of the chamber.

Russ shook his head. "Who knows? Hundreds, maybe *thousands* of years."

"You think he was the pilot of this ship?"

"It looks that way," Russ whispered.

"What do you think happened to him?"

Russ was silent for a moment, then moved closer, bending over the stone ribs that encased the creature's torso. "Part of the ribs here are bent outward, like something exploded out from within his body." The camera moved in to a section of the ribs where there was a gaping black hole surrounded by shattered rib sections, bent upward by what must have been great force. "I have no idea what could have killed him, but it seems related to this chest injury he sustained."

"This place gives me the creeps," Anne fretted. "Let's see what else is here. I don't want to leave Timmy and Newt alone for too long."

After a moment, Russ nodded. "Yeah, that's a good idea."

The video ended.

Ripley sat back, drink in hand, a swirl of confused and disjointed thoughts in her mind. There were two more video files. She did not want to watch them, but knew she would be unable to stop herself from doing so. Taking another drink, her hand trembling slightly, she clicked on the next one.

When the recording began, Russ was standing in deep shadows by one of the walls of the interior of the spacecraft, which were ribbed with what appeared to be enormous alien bones. The interior was massive, much bigger than the previous chamber; the curving walls seemed to go on forever and disappeared around an interior bend, shrouded in gloom. The effect of being in this huge, dark space was like being in a gargantuan subterranean cavern.

Despite her horror at what she knew was going to happen, Ripley could not turn away. The size of the interior of the ship and its biomechanical structure rendered her with a mixture of both revulsion and fascination in spite of herself. This was where the *Nostromo's* executive officer Gilbert Ward Kane, otherwise known as Thomas, had first discovered the alien parasite that killed him. It had been Kane, always the adventurous one, who had volunteered to be lowered into the hold of the alien ship. Kane, who had always wanted to be an explorer, who had lived always wondering what else was out there. His innate curiosity had been the end of him.

Covering the deck on which Russ stood was a glowing bluish light source, a beam of horizontal light that hovered inches above the deck, swirling with mist. Russ Jorden looked around, up, down at the blue electric light that illuminated his legs. "We are in the lower deck of the spacecraft, which looks like a cargo hold. The deck is filled with sunken pits filled with thousands of eggs."

"Why would this ship be transporting all these eggs?" Anne Jorden asked. She sounded deeply unsettled.

"I have no idea," Russ answered doubtfully. "I'm going to climb down into one of these areas to take a closer look."

The camera jerked crazily as Anne climbed down with him. They stood in a dark garden of eggs, thick tendrils snaking over the deck, covered with a slimy type of mucus-like resin. The eggs were about two and a half feet tall, semi-transparent, with a pebbled, leathery texture. The camera moved around the field of eggs as they looked at them in silence.

Anne said off camera, "Russ I don't like the looks of this. It looks like this ship was transporting a whole colony of alien creatures. We don't know anything about what kind of creatures they *are*."

Before Russ could answer, one of the eggs in front of him peeled open with a sickening sticky-slimy sound, its top parting like the petals of a flower, coated with ropy strands of slime. The camera jiggled in surprise, and trained on the egg.

Russ took a step forward, taking a cautious look into the top of the open egg shape.

Anne spoke up off-camera, alarmed. "Russ get back, you have no idea what-"

When it happened, it happened extremely fast.

A blur streaked out of the egg, accompanied by a startled scream of terror from Anne. The camera zipped back and forth, no longer displaying a coherent image, but the horrifying screams were captured with chilling clarity.

"Russ!" Anne shrieked. More screams-

Ripley abruptly terminated the playback.

She was shaking, dimly realizing she was crying with a combination of anguish and acidic fury, eyes squeezed shut. Now she knew what had happened to Newt's parents. They had been the ones who had started the chain of events...been led to their deaths, to put it more accurately. They had been *sacrificed*, sacrificed to serve the greed and ambition of Carter Burke and Weyland-Yutani. All those people, all those deaths, it was all to serve the greed of others.

She sat back in the chair, trembling, fighting back tears, feeling waves of revulsion, horror and impotent fury. She took a large pull of her whiskey. It burned her throat going down, but it steadied her somewhat.

Christ. How did I get into the middle of all this, she wondered bitterly.

There was still one video file left.

When she felt in control of herself, she opened it, not wanting to but knowing she had no choice.

The video opened with Anne Jorden's face close to the camera, holding it towards herself. Her face was haunted and stricken, eyes wide with terror. Grime was smeared on her face. She was hunkered low in what looked like the med lab; there were gleaming workstations behind her; microscopes, test tubes, data terminals. In the background there were banging

sounds and shouting. People ran back and forth behind her, screaming. Occasional bursts of gunfire.

"This is Anne Jorden," she said in a strained voice. "I'm sending this so there will be some sort of record, in case no one makes it out alive. We've sent a distress signal, but I don't know if we'll be able to hold out by the time anyone gets here, or if the message even made it out. I'm going to upload this through the ICC docking transmitter, I'm pretty sure I can configure it to send these files through the relay beacons back to Earth."

She looked quickly behind her, as if to check for danger, then faced the camera again. A large boom echoed in the background, followed by more shouts of urgency.

"The situation is dire." She ran a hand through her hair, and absently wiped a tear that had escaped from her eye. "We're completely cut off. Russ Jorden, my husband, is dead. The egg that we discovered in that spacecraft attacked him...attached...attached itself to his *face*. I got him back to the med bay, but before we could find a way to get the goddamned thing *off* of him, it fell off by itself, dead. An hour...later...a...a *creature* exploded out of his chest."

She paused, squeezing her eyes shut, tears streaming down her face. She struggled to control her voice, crying quietly as the shouts and sounds of gunfire continued in the background. "My Russ..." she sobbed. "My beautiful Russ...gone..."

Abruptly she shook her head, determined to go on, urgently wiping away the tears. She looked at the camera again, her eyes wild and pleading. "**Listen** - these creatures are powerful and incredibly hostile. They've been abducting some of the colonists and taking them to the processing station. We...we don't have a way to save them, we can barely defend ourselves *here*. We've barricaded all of the entrances to the compound, but somehow they've gotten through. Security Chief Gomez organized a counter offensive to stop them, but it failed. He's...he's dead. Small weapons, seismic charges, flamethrowers...nothing is working. We had to retreat to the med bay in the command complex where we're making our last stand. But it doesn't look good."

There was a high-pitched scream in the background; it seemed impossible human vocal cords could reach those octaves. Anne Jorden turned around quickly, startled, then back toward the camera. "Our time is short. If you are seeing this, *stay away* from LV-426. **Do not let anyone come here**. This planet needs to be *quarantined* indefinitely. It's only a matter of time before-

There was another terrified scream, much closer this time, followed by a loud explosion and more screams. Anne's eyes widened as she stared off camera. "*Oh SHIT!*" she shrieked.

The video went black.

Ripley sat back in her chair badly shaken; she had broken out into a cold sweat. Her thoughts were jumbled as she sat in the silence.

Abruptly she got up, suddenly needing fresh air. She refilled her whiskey glass and stepped out onto the balcony, leaning on the stone railing, deep in thought. An air car with bright navigation lights glided past her just below the balcony, getting lost in the dark canyons of tall buildings.

Anne Jorden must have sent these files in a hurry, right before they were taken to the nest at the base of the atmospheric processing station. But if Anne was right, and a call for help

was sent, why did Carter Burke say that they had lost contact with the colony? Why had the company not acknowledged getting the distress signal?

Thinking about it further, these videos were irrefutable evidence that the company had purposely directed the colonists to the spacecraft. It contradicted the official explanation of what had happened, and directly implicated Burke, a representative of Weyland-Yutani. These video files, coupled with all the data she had secretly downloaded, contained enough evidence to warrant serious criminal and civil charges.

It seemed very unlikely that the company was aware that these videos existed; they had been sent through a comm network the company didn't control.

So, the question was, exactly what was Ripley going to do about all this?

She sipped her whiskey, watching the stream of air car traffic flow past the buildings in the distance. She discovered that a large part of her did not *want* to do anything about it. She was tired of dealing with the company, tired of the deceit and the cover-ups...all she wanted now was just to be a mother to a precious little girl and to get on with her life. The only question was, would the company let her do that.

It took her a very long time to find sleep later that night, and when it finally came, it was restless and filled with images of unspeakable horror.

EIGHT

The doors slid open and dozens of children flowed through them like loosely organized flotsam toward the plaza where some of the parents were waiting, clustered in small groups, chatting amicably.

Ripley stood apart from them; she had not warmed up to the other parents of Newt's school and she assumed the feeling was mutual. Most of the other parents she had met were either homemakers or had jobs in the offices in the buildings which surrounded the school. Their lives consisted of office work, community events, parent-teacher conferences...it was a world that was foreign to her, and she had discovered she was not all that interested in becoming involved in their social circles. What was she going to talk about with them? Years of laying in stasis while waiting to be rescued? Running firefights with hostile alien xenomorphs? The comrades she had lost on distant planets?

The school was located on the 43rd floor of a tall skyscraper in the Northport Heights section, which was connected to other buildings by a conveyor walk network. The building was also home to various private and government offices, as well as shopping plazas and recreation centers. The plaza into which the children were streaming was a glassed-in atrium with a lofty, transparent ceiling that offered a view of the buildings that towered over it, similar to a greenhouse. There was a small fountain in the center of the plaza, and benches along the sides where people were congregating. A video screen beside the doorway provided constantly changing updates about school schedules and events.

Ripley stood alone, watching the exit; she made sure to pick up Newt every afternoon when school let out. She had arranged her work schedule to make it possible, although she could not walk her to school in the mornings. The anxiety Ripley felt at not being able to be with Newt all the time had surprised her, but perhaps it was not unexpected, considering what they had been through. Being able to pick her up from school was the highlight of her day, and the one thing she looked forward to after a day spent working freight loaders.

Eventually, Newt came out of the exit with her bag of school supplies slung over one shoulder, walking alone, in contrast to the small groups of other children who were clustered together, laughing and talking excitedly. We're both outsiders, Ripley thought with wry amusement.

She walked over to Ripley, who asked, "How was school?"

Newt shrugged unenthusiastically. "It was okay."

They started walking toward the conveyor walk entrance. "Just okay?"

"I don't like the other kids. They bug me."

"Bug you how?"

Newt furrowed her forehead, searching for the right words. "They're loud and they're always talking about stupid stuff, and the girls are all trying to make the boys talk to them, and the boys are just dumb."

Ripley smiled. "Well, you've survived a lot more than they will ever go through. Eventually you'll find some kids you like, it will just take time. Give them a chance."

"I guess," Newt responded. She didn't sound convinced.

As they walked, Ripley was looking around idly at the other parents who are greeting their children or waiting for them to come out, when her eyes fell on the man with the blue trench coat and long sideburns. Instantly she was alert and stepped closer to Newt. They were in a public place, so she doubted she was in any real danger, but the fact remained that he had been following her all over the city ever since she left spacedock housing and now she was at Newt's school, and that meant she would have to take proactive steps to find out who he was and why he was shadowing her.

She took Newt's hand and led her quickly through the wide conveyor walk entrance, stepping onto the moving walkway along with a small group of other parents and their children. She looked back to see if the man in the trench coat would follow, but he was gone.

They rode in silence for a while, Ripley's struggling to forget about the man so she could enjoy her time with Newt, but vowing to make sure Newt was protected from now on. The long windows on either side of the conveyor walk offered striking vistas of the cityscape, with gleaming, silver buildings, rivers of air cars, huge view screens with endlessly looping animations and smiling faces, lit by a tired sun filtered by a slight haze.

"Mom, do you love Hicks?"

Ripley looked down, surprised. "Why do you ask, sweetheart?"

Newt shrugged as if making a show of not caring, even though it was obvious she did. "I was just wondering," she said. "If you're going to be my new mom, who is going to be my new dad?"

She paused, considering her answer, and said at last, "The three of us went through a lot on LV-426. That has a way of forming a bond between people. But to answer your question, yes, I like him."

"Do you like him a lot?"

Ripley laughed. "Yes, Newt, I suppose I like him a lot."

"Do you think he likes you?"

"Yes, I think he does."

"Do you think he loves you?"

Ripley laughed again. "Honey, I don't know. If he does, I'm sure he will find a way to let me know. Are you worried you won't see him again?"

Newt nodded. "I like him." she said, as if coming to a conclusion.

"Well I know he likes you a lot too. We'll see him again, I'm sure of it."

She looked down thoughtfully, then, "Is he going to be my new dad?"

Ripley gave her a mockingly severe look. "Hey, come on, give me a break." She smiled, and Newt smiled back.

■ ■ ■

"I've never been to a restaurant this fancy," Hicks commented. "You really shouldn't have, Ellen."

Ripley sipped her wine, one of the best ones she had ever tasted. "Well I do owe you for helping me adopt Newt. Plus, for everything you did up there. Dinner doesn't seem like it's enough, so I wanted it to be a good one."

She didn't mention the fact that as Newt's legal guardian, Ripley had also inherited the Jordens' bank accounts, which were substantial. They had been well off, and the fact was she could easily afford such an expensive restaurant.

It was one of the best restaurants in the city, high above the skyline looking down on the nebula of apartment lights, glowing billboards, and rivers of flying cars which threaded its way between the buildings, a continuous blood stream of commerce. Hicks and Ripley sat at a table beside a giant window overlooking it all, eating one of the finest meals Ripley had ever had.

Hicks, having been discharged from the hospital, looked much better; the eye patch was gone, as was the sling, and his hair had begun to grow back, albeit unevenly. While dressed in a white dress shirt and dark slacks, he still managed to retain a comforting rough around the edges aura.

"I was just doing my job," he said with characteristic lack of ego. He looked regretfully down on his food. "I lost some of the best friends I've ever had on that planet."

Ripley looked unhappy as well. "I'm sorry, Dwayne. Truly I am. What happened up there was not your fault, and now we have to live with the aftermath."

There was a morose silence as they thought about it while they ate.

To change the subject, she asked, "Is there a woman in your life, Dwayne?"

"There was," he answered after a moment.

"What happened?"

He took a sip of beer from his crystal glass, looking reflective. "She didn't like the fact that I was gone so much...bug hunts on distant worlds, constant training, that kind of thing. She found someone else."

"I'm sorry."

Hicks shrugged. "Don't be. Being a Marine is tough on a relationship. So, tell me about you." He ate another piece of prime rib.

"What about me?" she answered, feeling uncharacteristically self-conscious.

"Well, we almost lost our lives together on some distant rock and I hardly know anything about you. Tell me a little about the real Ellen Ripley."

"What specifically would you like to know?" she parried.

"Have you ever been married?"

"No...but there was a man, before I joined the *Nostromo*. We had a daughter together."

Hicks grinned. "Now I'm interested. What was his name?"

Ripley sipped her wine. "His name was Alex. I met him on a layover when I was in the US Merchant Navy serving as co-pilot aboard the *Zelazny*. We dated for a while, and I got pregnant, and even though the company forbade its flight officers from having children, I did it anyway." She ate some more salmon, savoring the flavor of food that didn't come from a food processing terminal.

Hicks chuckled. "I like that. What happened to him?"

"Well, after our daughter was born, he decided he didn't want to be a father after all, and he went his own way." Hicks looked diplomatically sympathetic, so she continued, "It was actually for the better. We didn't have enough in common to make it a successful long-term relationship anyway."

She took another sip of wine, thinking about Alex, for whom she had once briefly been so smitten, but who now was a distant memory. She had not thought about him for years, and was not surprised to discover she had no feelings toward him at all, negative or positive.

"What happened to your daughter? Tell me about her."

She felt the familiar pang of loss, every time she thought of Amy. "Her name was Amanda. I called her Amy. She had a full life, and passed away while I was in stasis, waiting to get rescued after fleeing the *Nostromo*."

Hicks looked regretful. "Now it's my turn to be sorry," he said in a low voice. There was an uncomfortable silence before he suddenly looked like he was bursting to say something, but trying to act suave about it. He leaned forward with restrained enthusiasm. "The *Nostromo*...I didn't get a chance to ask you, because we were fighting for our lives, but I'd love to know what happened on that ship, if you're okay talking about it. You have to understand, the *Nostromo* has taken on an almost mythical reputation. Right up there with the *Mary Celeste*."

Ripley sipped her wine. "Mythical reputation?"

"Absolutely," Hicks said enthusiastically. "The *Nostromo* disappeared without a trace fifty-seven years ago. No one had any idea what happened to it; it just *vanished*. That ship has been fueling conspiracy theories and ghost stories for years."

Ripley looked intrigued. "I had no idea. What kinds of conspiracy theories?"

Hicks was warming up to the subject, finally a chance to satisfy his curiosity. "People were digging into the backgrounds of the crew trying to find some sort of explanation. Some suggested that Parker had sabotaged the ship."

Ripley laughed, surprised and amused. "*Parker??* That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard."

"What was Parker like?" Hicks asked, leaning forward like someone who has discovered a long lost artifact.

"Parker was strictly in it for the money. Being on the *Nostromo* was just a job, a way to save up enough so he could open his own bar. He was angling for a greater share than what he had signed up for, but at the end, when we were fighting for our lives, he was in the same situation as the rest of us."

"There's also a theory that Dallas was responsible for what happened on the *Nostromo*, that it was his negligence which caused the ship to go missing."

She scowled. "Let me tell you something about Dallas. He was one of the best captains I ever served with. A lot of captains wear their rank expecting to be treated like royalty. Dallas was a low-key captain who let us do our jobs. In fact, after the alien creature killed Kane, *he* was the one who volunteered to go into the air ducts to try to flush the alien out so we could capture it. He sacrificed himself to save the ship and the crew."

"Wow," Hicks said, impressed. He took a sip of his beer. "There goes *that* theory."

Ripley finished chewing her salmon and scallops and wiped her mouth. "You read my data disc when we were aboard the *Sulaco*," she said, "You know what happened."

"True, but your data disc only gave the most minimal information. For example, how come you had such a hatred for artificial persons? I thought you were going to tear Bishop's head off after we woke up from hypersleep."

Ripley took another drink of wine, composing her thoughts. She said, "The company knew before the *Nostromo* left Earth that there was a derelict spacecraft with those creatures in it. That's why we were diverted on the way back home, and that's *also* why our normal science officer was replaced with Ash, who was an artificial person, but none of us knew it. We were all considered...expendable by the company; bring back that thing at all costs. When I found out about Ash and about the company's secret directive, he tried to kill me. It was Parker and Lambert who pulled him off of me."

"He definitely must have been programmed that way," Hicks said grimly. "It's inconceivable that an artificial person would do something like that unless he was specifically programmed."

"He was programmed to keep it all secret from the rest of us and do whatever it took to protect that alien," she said bitterly.

Her rage at Ash still smoldered, after all this time. First Ash, then Burke. She leaned forward, her eyebrows lowered severely. "I'll tell you something else: when Kane, Dallas, and Lambert came back to the ship with that parasite on Kane's face, I refused to let them in. Quarantine procedures call for twenty-four hours. Dallas was *furious* with me. He wanted to get Kane into the medbay, but we had no idea what we were dealing with. It was *Ash* that opened the airlock and let them in. *He's* the one that let that creature get aboard the ship."

"He was protecting it," Hicks surmised, "fulfilling his mission."

"That's exactly what he was doing."

Hicks nursed his beer, looking perplexed. "What I can't figure out is, how in the world did the company discover that ship was there?"

"I have no idea,"

"Do *you* have any idea where it came from?"

Ripley finished her salmon and pushed her plate forward, picking up her nearly depleted wine glass. The waiter came by and refilled it. After he was out of earshot, she said thoughtfully, "The alien eggs were being transported. From where, I have no idea. The ship crash-landed on that planet hundreds, maybe *thousands* of years ago. Inside was a humanoid which looked like it might have been the pilot or operator. His whole body was fossilized, he had been there so long. There was an explosion in his chest; I think that somehow he was impregnated by one of the aliens and it killed him."

Hicks looked fascinated. "Killed by your own cargo," he marveled. "If that ship has been there for thousands of years, it's *unbelievable* those eggs could still be viable. These creatures are incredibly tough."

She drank more wine. "I can't imagine what kind of planet or evolutionary process created these monsters. Not a place I'd ever want to see."

He sat back, pushing his empty plate forward. "Well thanks for telling me about the mystery of the *Nostromo*. It's not often you get to speak with someone who has inside information on one of the greatest interstellar mysteries of modern times.'

Ripley looked skeptical.

"Hey come on now," he said with his lopsided grin. "Like it or not, you're part of history."

"Not by choice," she answered bitterly.

Seeing the conversation was starting to veer onto the wrong track, he quickly changed the subject. "Listen, how is Rebecca doing?"

Ripley brightened. "It's funny you should mention her," she said, looking down at her wine with a small smile. "She asked about you the other day."

"What did she say?"

Ripley struggled for words as she laughed lightly. "She wanted to know if you were going to be her new dad."

The two of them looked at each other for a moment and then simultaneously burst into laughter, a deep laughter that stemmed not only from Newt's question but also from the weeks of stress and the culmination of everything that they had endured. For almost five minutes they laughed deeply, gales of laughter that attracted the annoyed attention of other diners around them.

When Ripley had herself somewhat under control, she wiped tears of laughter from her eyes and said, "That wasn't a proposition by the way, I'm just reporting what she told me."

Hicks was getting his laughter under control, and said, "What did you tell her?"

"I told her the chances are pretty good that she would see you again. Because she wants to."

"Well I would love to see her again," Hicks replied with a genuine smile. Was she starting to fall for that lopsided grin, his understated style and the mischievous twinkle in his eyes? She

decided it was a distinct possibility. He leaned forward and looked Ripley directly in the eyes. "In fact, I would like to see *you* again. Do you think that can be arranged?"

Ripley smiled, a smile that glowed. "Yes, I definitely think that can be arranged."

NINE

In hindsight, she should have expected what happened.

Ripley maneuvered the power loader across the empty cargo bay, taking one ponderous step after another. The P-5000 Powered Work Loader was a mechanized exoskeleton that allowed the operator to lift heavy loads such as crates and cargo containers. It had two huge legs and two arms, powered by hydraulics which duplicated the operator's movements. Looking like a tall toy robot, the machines had become indispensable in many commercial applications.

With echoing thuds that reverberated in the warehouse, the yellow spinning light atop the machine throwing swirling beams of color on the surrounding walls, Ripley walked the loader toward the line of deactivated loaders against the far wall. They stood like sleeping mechanical robots frozen in place. Turning around, she backed into the last remaining spot and used the keypad to turn off the power before unfastening the safety harness from her torso. She unlatched the safety cage and swung it up, climbing down onto the warehouse floor.

Almost without thinking about it, she went through the motions of connecting the loader to the power cables that came out of the wall so it would be charged for another day's work tomorrow. She was tired; it had been a long day and she was looking forward to another dinner together with Newt. The novelty and sense of wonder at having a little girl in her life to take care of, to have dinner with, to tell stories to had not yet left her, and she hoped it never would. After everything she had been through, she finally felt like things were falling into place.

She had been so determined to get her flight officer license back, but upon thinking about it, she wondered why it was so important to her. She had a daughter again, a second chance at being a mother. What was she going to do, ship out on another spacecraft somewhere, and leave Newt behind, the way she did with Amy? The more she thought about it, the less sense it made. Yes, there were perks and higher pay, but with her inheritance of the Jordens' financial accounts, she didn't really need the higher pay. Come to think of it, she didn't really didn't need *this* job either; she was doing it because it represented stability. Having someplace to go every day was helping her slowly integrate into this new reality. To tell the truth, the *last* thing she needed was to get her license back so she could jet off to some distant solar system. In fact-

She stopped short, yanked out of her deep thoughts. *Why was it so quiet?*

Walking across the empty floor, surrounded by high and impossibly angular mountains of cargo and freight, she suddenly realized that the warehouse was deserted, which struck her as strange. At this hour of the evening, there were usually at least a few people present, if not

working other loaders, then wandering around with data terminals, taking inventory or preparing manifests.

Right now, however, there was no one. The place was utterly silent.

Feeling slightly unnerved, Ripley headed toward the open door on the other side of the warehouse floor that led to the locker area, where she would change before heading home. A deformed rectangle of light was projected onto the dusty concrete floor.

As she walked toward the door, someone stepped into the doorway, obstructing it.

Ripley stopped short, startled.

Whoever it was issued no greeting, and stood silently in the doorway, a black silhouette against the light from the locker room beyond. All around her was large silence.

"Hello?" Ripley called. "Blair, is that you?"

The figure at the doorway did not respond. Instead, it began to walk forward slowly. Toward her.

It could have been just another employee of the warehouse coming to retrieve something he might have forgotten. It could be a security guard making sure she was all right. There could be any number of innocent reasons why the warehouse was deserted, why this person was striding towards her silently.

Except she was in danger. She was certain.

She backed up and decided to exit through the other door that led into the administrative offices. The hell with the shower, she could shower when she got home, when she was safe. She turned and started walking quickly across the floor, and she could hear the soft shuffling noises of the person behind her walking with a casual slowness, as if he had all the time in the world.

The administrative office was located on the other side of the warehouse, past the loaders and tall canyons of cargo. A single door led to the offices, and as she drew nearer, the door opened and another figure stepped into the threshold, not moving. Like the first figure, he was heavily built, and silhouetted by the light beyond.

Ripley stopped again, her heart rate beginning to accelerate. She was trapped. There was no other way out of the warehouse.

A huge silence, filled with menace.

She had to find a way out, and get back home to Newt as quickly as possible. *Think, Ripley think.*

Behind the line of loaders was a pressure door which led to the hydraulic machinery and generators that powered the overhead cranes in the warehouse. The machine room was connected to various parts of the building and should offer her a way out. The problem was that the men would see her run across the open floor, and she would have precious few seconds to open the pressure door. Not only that, but the door could not be sealed from the inside. There was no logical reason why the door should need to be locked from within, which meant that her pursuers could follow her.

But it was the only way out.

Before she could talk herself out of it, she bolted towards the loaders, which towered over her like mechanical giants. Out of the corner of her eye she saw the two men running after

her. She ducked between two loaders, spotted the access panel, ripped it open, entered the access code. The steel pressure doors slid open grudgingly.

She ducked through, not bothering to try to close it behind her. The room beyond was dimly lit and huge, filled with large pressure driven turbines that provided power to the huge cranes that operated in the cargo facility, and batteries that fed power to the loaders. A forest of piping ran vertically from the floor to the ceiling like impossibly straight trees, joined by horizontal pipes that ran across the ceiling. A bank of controls lined one wall, filled with gauges, switches and darkened monitor screens. Ripley raced over to it and began turning power systems on, flipping every switch she could find as she ran by.

Turbines began to start up with loud whines, clouds of steam and vapor beginning to emerge from ventilation ducts in the machinery, creating thick clouds that would give her some cover. The machinery created a deafening environment that she hoped would disorient her pursuers and give her a critical few seconds as her pursuers searched for her.

Keeping low, she moved through the clouds towards the pressure door that opened into the main hallway, which led to the exit. Reaching the heavy steel door, she quickly keyed in the security code and ducked into the hallway, sealing the door and cutting the sound off like a knife. The exit was at the end of a long hallway; Just as she neared the doors, wood and plasti-fiber from the door frame exploded around her.

They were *shooting* at her.

Running for her life now, she sprinted down through the darkened parking lot. There were a few cargo containers on one side, a few ground cars parked here and there, and beyond, a conveyor walk entrance.

She raced in a slightly zig-zag pattern as she heard bullets exploding behind her. She didn't dare look back, but judging by the pounding footfalls she guessed she had maybe a thirty yard lead.

Through the conveyor walk entrance, pounding down the moving walkway towards a small group of people in colorful clothing, on their way to the adjacent club district. She had a bit of safety here; the men chasing her would not dare to fire their weapons with so many witnesses.

She hoped.

She came up behind them and pushed her way through, leaving them in her wake. As she passed, she overheard one person say, "Someone's in a hurry to party!" followed by laughter, another voice calling after her, "What's your hurry, baby?"

An overhead video screen attached to the ceiling indicated she was approaching the club district, a trendy section filled with nightclubs, bars and open air markets; it would be crowded, noisy and provide valuable cover. Running along the moving conveyor walk, she spotted the exit up ahead. She stepped onto the slower-moving lane of the conveyor walk and ducked through the wide exit, looking around quickly.

The club district had made use of the abandoned buildings of the decaying industrial sector, taking advantage of the lower rents, becoming a fashionable place to party amid the freight yards, warehouses, repair depots, and machine shops. Tonight the district was jammed with people of all types looking for a good time.

A river of very slow moving, battered ground cars filled the street, illuminated by a galaxy of multi-colored neon lights and video screens from the buildings on either side of the street, advertising nightclubs and bars. Music from the clubs competed with the ambient sounds of people's voices and the video screens that displayed a never-ending series of provocative images. The sidewalks on either side of the street were crowded with people of all shapes and sizes, wearing all manner of clothing and styles. Overhead, a slow-moving automated blimp was displaying large images of women winking suggestively at the crowd below while speakers blared come-ons for various products; "IT'S THE NEW LOOK, AVAILABLE **NOW!**"

Ripley moved quickly into the crowds lining the sidewalk, looking for a place where she could lose her pursuers. Strange faces. Music from the night clubs. Excited voices. Noise. Cacophony. Distraction.

Looking ahead, she immediately spotted two men who didn't belong, whom she assumed were also after her. Their eyes were sharp and alert, their movements precise and purposeful as they scanned the crowds, not in a festive posture. They were converging on her location.

The video screen above her boomed with a cheerful male voice: "DON'T MISS THE OPPORTUNITY OF A **LIFETIME!**"

Looking behind her, Ripley could see four men emerge from the conveyor walk, pushing through the crowds, toward her.

"VISIT CLUB NIRVANA FOR A TIME YOU WON'T **FORGET!** SEE THE HOT NEW SHOW **NOW!**"

She ducked into the street, keeping low among the cars that were barely moving as they inched through the club district. Strange smiling faces looked out at her from within them. Above, the blimp and its flashing lights blared on: "A NEW FACE, A NEW **YOU** AWAITS **YOU** AT THE **JEFFERSON INSTITUTE!** REINVENT YOURSELF AND BE **AMAZED!**"

The two men moving her way had spotted her and were trying as quickly as they could to push through the crowds. Behind, her pursuers from the warehouse were doing the same thing. Unless she did something in the next few seconds, she would be caught in a pincer movement.

On the other side of the street was a huge nightclub with an enormous neon sign that had a sexy kneeling woman with cat ears and a tail winking seductively, its candy stripe glow bathing the people with light who were streaming in and out. Ripley jumped up and darted in front of two lanes of cars, racing towards the entrance of the club. Taking a quick glance behind her, she saw her pursuers frantically trying to get through the river of slow-moving cars and people in pursuit.

"IT'S THE HOTTEST SCENE IN TOWN, AND IT'S HAPPENING **RIGHT NOW!**" blared the overhead blimp, sweeping the street below with multicolored light.

She shouldered through throngs of people, ducking inside. The club was huge and jammed with people dancing, mingling, jumping up and down and grinding against each other, accompanied by the rhythmic pulsing of loud dance music. A huge round bar three people deep was off to the right. Above, large cylindrical pods moved up and down from the ceiling like slow-moving pistons, the ends of the cylinders splitting open like petals of a mechanical upside-down flower, revealing video screens that showed animated dancing figures, before

closing and moving upward again. The air was thick with cigarette smoke, perfumes and perspiration.

She plunged into the crowd, keeping low and glancing behind her. She could see the six figures who had been pursuing her standing at the entrance, people moving in and out between them. The six were joined by two more, and they all conferred briefly. Two men remained at the entrance as the other six spread out evenly and began to move from the front of the club to the back, scanning faces.

A dragnet.

Ripley had no doubt that the back of the club would be covered as well. She had to get rid of her pursuers so she could get back to the apartment. If they were after her, it stood to reason that they had already been to her apartment, looking for Newt. If they had not, they would very soon. It was time to take chances.

She moved deeper into the crowd, angling toward the enormous round bar that was thronged with intoxicated people snapping expensive lighters at each other and making strained small talk over the noise. Above the bar were video screens and light pods that swept the club with colored beams of light. Bartenders worked feverishly to keep up with the demand for drinks.

Squeezing through the bodies, she spotted several bar stools with coats thrown over them, temporarily forgotten by their owners who were drinking and shouting conversations at each other. Without thinking she grabbed a blue and pink sequined coat and threw it over her shoulders, moving on quickly.

Behind her, the men continued to move through the crowd, methodically scanning faces, taking their time. One of them was drawing closer to the bar, eyes narrowed to slits, brow furrowed in concentration. They would not fire their guns in here, but there were lots of other ways to incapacitate someone in such an environment without people noticing, especially when the alcohol was flowing so freely.

Ripley squeezed further into the club, and on another chair spotted an ornate hat with a wide brim. She snatched it and moved on quickly, fitting it on to her head and pulling the brim down low, always moving toward the rear of the club.

The man approaching the bar was closer to her now, and he swept his gaze her way. Quickly, Ripley turned her back, and lowered her head and began to move up and down in time with the crowds around her. Her blood pounded, her heart raced. She looked around again cautiously and saw that the man had shifted his gaze elsewhere as he continued to scan faces.

Moving as casually as she could, she squeezed through tightly packed people towards the rear of the club, where the restrooms and side lounges were located. People were milling around the restroom exits smoking cigarettes, making snappy talk, ingesting illegal substances. Beside the exits to the restrooms were doors to the kitchen and offices.

There was a large bald man in an expensive suit standing in front of the door to the offices. Ripley drew up to him and he frowned down at her. She said, "There's a man with a gun, I think he's harassing people. He's over there wearing a gray jacket."

The man guarding the door snapped his head up and moved away from the door, speaking into a small transmitter attached to his wrist to summon other bouncers. While he was distracted, she tried the door handle to the offices, praying it was open.

She was in luck; the door opened and she slipped inside quickly, closing it behind her and moving up the stairs to the second floor. Shedding the coat and hat, she walked quickly past a row of desks where several people were working at computer terminals who looked up in surprise as she ran by. One of them called out to her but she ignored him, heading toward the rear of the building to a door that said emergency exit over it. Without thinking she shouldered open the door, stepping out onto a set of steel stairs that led down to a dark alley below.

Quickly she descended the steps, spotting two men in gray coats milling around the rear exit, on alert. A cargo van was backed up to the club, delivering more liquor. Climbing over the railing of the emergency stairs, she jumped ten feet down to the top of the van, landing as lightly as she could and falling to her stomach, immediately still, listening intently.

The noise in the alley behind the club had masked the sound of her landing on the van roof. The operator finished unloading the alcohol and climbed back in, and put the van in motion. Over her shoulder, Ripley watched the two men recede in the alley as the van drove away.

■ ■ ■

The door to her apartment slid open and Ripley ducked through quickly, her nerves as taut as a violin string. She opened the hall closet and, from a hidden compartment, retrieved a large caliber military grade handgun. Possession of military weapons was strictly forbidden, but Hicks had managed to get her one, saying, *you may have need for this sooner or later*. Against her better judgment, she had accepted it, and now she was glad she had. She did not like guns; she was a pilot, not a soldier, but circumstances had forced her hand. She slapped a magazine into the gun and with a two-handed grip, held it in front of her as she stepped into the apartment, looking around carefully.

The kitchen was empty and tidy, the way she'd left it this morning. She was on her way over to the hallway behind the dining room table to check Newt's room when a small glint of light caught her eye, from the sunken living room.

Struggling to control her breathing so her aim would be more accurate, she stepped quickly beside one of the large stone columns that framed the steps leading down into the living room and carefully peered around it.

Her heart leaped into her esophagus, and she felt instantly cold all over.

Sitting on one of the couches was Newt, and beside her, the man in the blue trench coat and long sideburns, the man who had been following her around the city.

TEN

The man watched her with an intense look, sitting forward on the dark leather couch. Newt sat beside him, a blank look on her face.

The apartment was deathly silent.

Ripley stepped partially around the column, using it for cover and aimed the gun at the man on the couch. Her finger rested on the trigger. In a low, deadly voice she said, "Get away from her right now."

The man didn't move; his expression didn't change in the slightest.

Ripley pulled back the hammer until it made an audible click. "Newt, honey, I want you to come over to me." She kept her eyes on trench coat man.

Another voice, familiar and soft. "Ellen - don't shoot."

A man stepped slowly into view from behind the column Ripley was using for cover. It was Hicks, his hands raised in a reassuring gesture.

Thoroughly baffled, she opened her mouth to say something but Hicks quickly put a finger to his lips. Tapped his ear with his forefinger. Twirled his forefinger around and around in the air; *don't talk, people are listening*.

Newt came over to her and she knelt, hugging her fiercely. Whispering in her ear, Ripley asked, "Are you all right, sweetheart?"

Newt nodded and whispered back, "Hicks says he is a friend."

Ripley took Newt's hand and stood up, lowering the gun. Hicks stepped closer and indicated the door; *time to leave*. She nodded and found Jones lying languidly under the dining room table. She scooped him up and deposited him in the pet carrier, following Hicks and Trenchcoat out of the apartment, holding Newt's hand. They stepped into the dimly lit elevator in silence.

She had expected they would be heading down, but instead Hicks pushed the button for the roof and the elevator car rose with a low, vibrating hum. No one spoke; Trenchcoat was watching her with an intense, not altogether friendly expression. Ripley returned his gaze in defiance; she had the handgun secured in the deep pocket of her blue coveralls, her hand resting on it. Let him make a move. She was ready.

The elevator doors opened onto the large concrete roof, dotted with ventilation ducts, blinking antennas that rose dozens of feet into the night sky, and spotlights that gave the roof a cold, bluish illumination. Sitting on the roof was an air car, its doors open, navigation lights blinking. Wisps of exhaust vapor drifted up from underneath it, snatched by the chill night wind.

They headed briskly toward the air car and climbed in; the seats in the back faced each other and the tall, curved windows offered large views of the surroundings. In the front, the pilot sat in a high-backed seat. Ripley quickly secured Newt into one of the seats while Hicks did the same.

"We're clear, Colonel, let's evac." he said tightly.

The pilot looked back at them; it was Colonel Williams. He gave Ripley a reassuring nod and smile before putting his hands on the controls. The roof dropped away below them, the evening cityscape tilting as the air car banked and glided away from the building. In moments they were level again, the galaxy of lit windows and large video billboards passing by the tall, curved windows.

Ripley looked at Hicks impatiently, and he said, "Ellen, this is Huxley. He's on our side. He-"

"He's been following me ever since I got back." Ripley interrupted flatly.

Hicks nodded. "Yes, to protect you. He's with the families of the colonists. I've verified that myself."

Ripley was nonplussed for a moment; she had not expected this. "So he decided to be my bodyguard?"

The man spoke at last. He had a deeper, almost guttural sounding voice. "You have no idea how much danger you're in, and you're the only one besides Hicks who can tell us what is going on."

She looked at him cynically. "That's why you've been following me?"

He nodded briefly. "We don't want anything to happen to you. I've been watching to see if anyone was going to make a move against you."

"Yeah, well they *did* - tonight."

The air car banked and through one of the rain-slicked windows they passed a huge video screen showing an Asian woman licking her finger seductively before it slid past, replaced with more tiny lighted windows. Hicks leaned forward and said, "Huxley has a line on internal Weyland communications. Apparently you were watching some transmissions from the colony the company didn't know about; they're pulling out all the stops to shut you up."

Ripley was stunned. "The apartment is bugged. That's how they found out, when I was watching them."

Huxley nodded. "Whatever those videos are, it's got the company very nervous. They want to make sure no one else ever sees them - or knows about them."

Hicks interjected, "Huxley reached out to me tonight to tell me the company had sent people after you. I had a feeling Newt was at the apartment alone, so I contacted Colonel Williams and we met Huxley there in case the company had thoughts of snatching her, using her for leverage."

"Thank you...thank you for that. So, where are we going now?"

"Someplace safe." Huxley answered gruffly; Hicks nodded in agreement.

Ripley fell silent, satisfied for the moment. As Williams guided the air car away from the center of the city, the hundreds of lighted windows began to thin out. He dropped altitude until they were flying between the darkened carcasses of abandoned apartment buildings and over empty streets, vacant lots, burned out houses and dark streetlights.

"This part of the city is off limits." Hicks said to Ripley. "It's a long story."

Presently, the air car's forward momentum slowed and Williams descended onto a dark, abandoned playground whose structures, surrounded by tall, weedy grass, looked like the fossilized bones of alien creatures. Surrounding the playground were monolithic shells of empty tenement buildings, the darkened windows devoid of glass. Rotting furniture dotted the grounds around the buildings. Above, the moon was a luminescent silver coin. The air car landed gently and they filed out, the whine of the engines dissipating, replaced with an eerie silence.

Ripley, carrying the cat carrier and holding Newt's hand, followed Williams, Hicks and Huxley away from the air car to one of the tall abandoned buildings, stepping through the threshold of what had once been the entrance; the door was missing. Broken glass and bits of concrete crunched under their feet. Williams activated a flashlight and led them to a pitch black stairwell that led down to a heavy steel door. The flashlight beam jiggling in the darkness, he opened an electrical access panel that was obviously inoperative, thumbing a hidden latch and

swinging the false breaker panel forward, revealing illuminated buttons. He pressed a code and the steel door swung open.

The door closed and locked behind them as they proceeded along a downwardly angled corridor lit with dim, tired ceiling lights that provided just enough illumination to see where they were going. Small chunks of rubble and trash littered the floor, and their footfalls echoed back at them. At the end was another steel door, this one reinforced. Williams punched in another code and it swung open. Stepping inside, Ripley found herself surrounded by people.

There were almost forty, arranged in a semi-circle as they stepped through the door. Their clothes were plain and their faces were drawn with visible anxiety, their eyes brimming with a desperate sort of hope. Newt looked at them with bewilderment, Ripley instinctively stepping in front of her as a shield

"All right, people, let's give them some room, step back now," said one of them, a tall thin woman in her mid-forties, brunette hair tinged with strands of gray, tied behind her head in a ponytail, her face just starting to show some lines. She wore blue work pants, a loosely fitting white buttoned down shirt and dark work boots. She had the air of a gentle leader as she stepped forward, and almost grudgingly, the crowd of people stepped back.

"Huxley, you made it." she said, sounding relieved; they exchanged a brief hug. "We've been monitoring the transmissions and we feared the worst." Huxley nodded briefly, his expression still dark with his unspoken concerns.

The woman turned to Ripley. "And you must be Ellen Ripley." she said warmly. "I can't tell you how much of a pleasure it is to meet you. My name is Rachel Carson, welcome. You and Rebecca are safe here." Eyes twinkling, she looked down at Newt. "Hello, Rebecca, you're among friends here."

"There is a lot to discuss." Huxley said flatly. "Rachel, can you have someone see that Rebecca is given some food? She must be hungry."

"Absolutely!" beamed Carson. "Rebecca would you like something to eat? I think I may even have...ice cream..." She looked up at Ripley with a friendly smile. "Is it all right if Rebecca has some ice cream?"

Ripley set the cat carrier down and looked around at her surroundings; they were on an abandoned subway platform. On her right was a battered subway train that had been converted into a makeshift dormitory, with bunk beds, furniture and storage bins, illuminated dimly by the subway cars' ceiling panels. People were wandering in and out of them, while others stood in small groups by the built-in benches on the platform, talking in low tones, watching them. Signs hanging from the rusty steel beams overhead displayed the station's name, PARKHURST. Wide tiled hallways led off in several places from the platform.

"Rebecca will be safe here, Ellen." Hicks said quietly.

"You and Rebecca are our guests of honor," said another woman who stepped forward. She was younger than Carson, with long, tousled dirty blonde hair and smiling eyes accented by a trace of crow's feet. "My name is Marta, and we are really glad you're here."

Ripley stepped a little closer to Carson, not smiling. In a low voice she said, "I do not want her peppered with questions about what happened, am I being clear?"

Carson and Marta nodded understandingly, their expressions free from any duplicity that Ripley could detect. "I completely understand." Marta answered, smiling. "No one will talk about anything she doesn't want to talk about. You have my word on that. I will look after her myself."

Ripley nodded and knelt before Newt, smiling and brushing away some of her blonde hair. "Newt, honey, I want you to go with this nice lady. She's going to give you something to eat and drink and she'll take good care of you. I'll be right in the next room."

"Right in the next room?" Newt asked timidly.

"Right in the next room, I promise."

Reluctantly, Newt accepted Marta's hand. She hunkered down and said with a warm, genuine smile, "Rebecca, honey, my name is Marta, and I am so very glad to meet you! How would you like some ice cream?" At Newt's tentative nod, she laughed and said, "Well let's go have some ice cream. Ripley will be right close by." She picked up the cat carrier from which Jones was watching the scene with an expression of utter boredom and led Newt toward the open door subway cars.

"This way, Ripley," Huxley said. She followed Huxley, Hicks and Colonel Williams, along with Carson into a wide concrete corridor, ducking into another large tiled room which had been repurposed as a makeshift command center. One wall was filled with banks of consoles at which various screens were displaying data and infrared video feeds of the surrounding buildings. There was a console on the other wall that was clearly a communications station and in the center of the room was a large table that was currently displaying a map of the city, illuminated from below. There were about four or five people manning the consoles and talking in low tones; the conversations ceased as they entered.

"What is this place?" Ripley asked, aware that the others were staring at her.

Williams said, "We used to conduct military exercises here years ago. Most everyone's forgotten about it, making this an ideal place to hide."

Huxley added, "I reactivated all the security systems; proximity sensors, infrared cameras, secure doors, the works. If anyone comes within a thousand feet of this place we'll know it."

"Why are these people here? What's happening?"

Williams stepped forward. "Ever since your testimony at the inquest, the company has been saying that the colony's transmitter is more seriously damaged than they thought. They're sending another ship out...to *repair* it."

"A ship that will have only Weyland Yutani people. No outsiders." Hicks interjected seriously. "They're telling everyone that the colonists are fine; they just can't communicate because of the transmitter."

Huxley said, "They've been asking the families if they want to send messages along with the second ship and have been coming down hard on those of us who don't believe them. Some families have had suspicious accidents, some have been followed by strange people, others have just *disappeared*. Some have found listening devices in their homes."

"The company is pulling out all the stops to make sure we don't question their version of events." Williams said darkly.

With frustration, Huxley exclaimed, "But since we don't *know* anything, we've had to retreat here because this is the only safe place until we can figure out what to do."

Carson wrung her hands, struggling to contain her anxiety. "We are all very worried about our families and we're hoping you can tell us what happened up there."

Ripley looked slowly at Hicks and Williams. Hicks shook his head gravely. "The colonel and I found out about all this within the last few hours. We haven't had time to tell them."

She sighed heavily. Would she *ever* be rid of this horrible company?

Carson said in a quiet voice, "How bad is it?"

To Ripley's immense relief, it was Hicks who answered. "It's bad," he said with deep regret. "Rebecca Jorden is the only survivor."

There was a horrified, stunned silence. Ripley, Hicks and Williams looked down unhappily, saying nothing.

Finally, in a choked whisper, Carson managed, "They're *ALL* gone...?"

Ripley nodded morosely, hating the company even more. She would not have thought it was possible. "I'm very sorry."

Huxley's expression was black and thunderous, looking like he had suspected this but hoping to be proven wrong. "What happened." His voice was a hoarse whisper.

Carson put a hand to her mouth and stepped back, sobbing quietly, deep racking sobs that caused her shoulders to shudder.

Ripley stepped forward to the illuminated table; the others in the room gathered around, their faces drawn and stricken in the cold blue light. "I have to warn you - it's not pleasant."

"Just tell us," Huxley answered, glowering. Carson came forward, eyes wide, hand on her mouth.

Ripley gave them an abbreviated account of the entire situation, beginning when the *Nostromo* first set down and discovered the derelict spacecraft, Kane's death and the alien creature which wiped out the others, leaving Ripley alone in the lifeboat. She described the xenomorph and its incredibly hostile nature, her rescue, and the first inquest. She recounted what they found when she and the Colonial Marines arrived at the colony, including Carter Burke's treachery, the destruction of the processing station, and the conclusion of the second inquest which placed the blame squarely on the colonists. As she spoke, Hicks confirmed her account and added certain details. The people around the table listened in mute horror and anguish, unable to speak. When she was finished, there was a long, heavy silence.

Breaking it, Carson asked in a strained voice barely above a whisper, "How...how are we going to tell the others...?"

Ripley could think of nothing to say.

"It was all about money," Huxley concluded. He sounded defeated.

"The company has been trying to smuggle an alien past ICC quarantine for a long time," Ripley answered. "They believe they can profit by analyzing its biology to create a new class of weapons."

Williams added, "They've told major investors that LV-426 represented huge profit opportunities; since the mission failed, they've been put in a very difficult position. There's no telling what steps they will take to keep you all quiet, when there is so much at stake."

Carson walked away for a moment, deep in thought, then came back to the table. "We can't let them get away with this. They...they just can't cause the deaths of all those people and get away with it."

Angrily, Huxley blurted, "What are we going to do, Rachel? They are a huge company with unlimited resources. How are we going to fight back?"

There was a long silence as everyone pondered the dilemma of trying to hold a multinational corporation with ties to the government and the military accountable, especially by a ragtag group of grieving families with no leverage.

Carson looked at Ripley with desperate hope. "Will you help us?"

The others looked at her hopefully, as if she alone could provide the answer. Ripley sighed deeply and said, "I'm sorry for what happened, I really am...but I'm tired of fighting. All I want to do is be left alone so I can raise Newt."

Hicks responded quietly, "You don't have that option anymore, Ellen. The company is not going to just let you go. The fact that they tried to silence you tonight proves it. You're involved whether you want to be or not."

Because she could think of nothing to say in response to that, Ripley said to Huxley, "What are you going to tell the families?"

Huxley ran a tired hand through his hair. There were new lines on his face that were not there before. "I don't know. It will have to be soon; they are very impatient with the lack of information. Some of them will want to strike back."

"They wouldn't have a chance against Weyland-Yutani." Hicks said gravely. "It would be suicide."

"That's exactly what I'm afraid of," Huxley answered. "Without some way to hold the company accountable, the situation is going to be very unstable."

There was a heavy silence. One of the people at the radio console broke it by calling over to Huxley, "Hey we have a situation here."

Huxley walked over to the communications console, followed by Ripley, Williams and Hicks. "What's going on, Perry?"

Perry was young and thin, with stringy black hair, an unshaven face and a camouflage jacket. Wearing a large pair of headphones, one hand rested lightly on an earpiece, as if still listening. "The perimeter sensors are picking up signals, lots of them. Men with guns." He pressed a button and on one of the overhead screens, grainy infrared images showed heavily-armed figures moving stealthily through the streets, bent over, ready.

"Is it the military?" Williams asked, dipping close to the screen, brow furrowed. "Maybe I can call them off."

"No, it doesn't look like it." Perry answered. "It looks like internal security for Weyland-Yutani. The signals I'm getting are definitely not military."

"They're going to invade this complex," Ripley declared bitterly, "and I doubt very much they intend to take prisoners."

Carson looked at Ripley in horror. "You mean they intend to *kill* us?"

Ripley folded her arms. "They can't afford to have so many people asking questions. Once we're gone they can make up any story they want."

"It's a golden opportunity." Hicks added grimly. "Almost all of the families are here, and there are no witnesses."

Behind him, Williams nodded. "Tactically, it makes sense. Flood the area with nerve gas, clean up what's left."

Alarmed, Carson turned to Perry. "Can we evacuate?"

Perry shook his head gloomily. "They have us boxed in. All the exits are covered. Even the service passageways."

"How many guns do we have?" Ripley asked, feeling the handgun resting in her pocket, unhappily aware it held only sixteen rounds.

Huxley said, "We have a few guns, but not enough to fight back. We can barricade the doors, but they *will* find a way in."

Hicks nodded. "And when they do, they will kill *all* of us."

ELEVEN

There was a moment of shocked silence. "They tracked the air car we used." Williams murmured. "Somehow they tracked us."

Huxley rounded on him. "How could that have happened? You said you had taken *steps!*"

Carson looked impatiently at Huxley. "It doesn't *matter* how. We need to get everyone out of here."

"You heard Perry - we're surrounded. How are we going to do that?"

"Well I don't know *how*, but we better find a way." Ripley declared urgently. "There has to be some way out of this place they don't know about."

Perry had stood up and joined them, his expression terrified. "There are only four ways out of this subway station and they're all covered. There are no air vents large enough to crawl through."

"Even if there were, we wouldn't have time to get everyone out." Williams added heavily.

The room fell silent, each person trying desperately to think of some way to survive. After a few minutes Hicks spoke, looking at Williams. "I think we may need to try the upload, Colonel."

Williams nodded. "That's all we have at this point." He looked up at the questioning faces. "Ripley gave copies of the mission and colony logs to Hicks, who shared them with me. Those, plus some highly incriminating files I obtained from Weyland, are enough to put people in prison. I uploaded them onto an encrypted server not controlled by the company; we can threaten to spread them on the global data network if Weyland doesn't pull its people back."

Ripley nodded thoughtfully. "It's the only leverage we've got; it will have to be enough." She looked up at Perry, who had begun to look hopeful. "Can you open a channel to their frequency?"

"Yeah, easy," he said, a frantic glimmer of hope in his eyes. "You think this will really work?"

"We're going to find out." Williams answered grimly. "C'mon." He hovered over Perry and showed him how to connect to the server he had set up.

Hicks wandered over to Ripley, who commented in a low voice, "Colonel Williams has thrown his career away by helping us, hasn't he?"

Hicks nodded soberly. "He couldn't stand by and do nothing, especially after losing his daughter-in-law."

She watched Williams work with Perry at the communications console, feeling a heightened sense of admiration and respect, mixed with a measure of guilt for what he was sacrificing. He was just as much in the middle as everyone else.

Williams turned around. "Okay, we're ready. We've set it up so we can give them a taste of the evidence we have. Just a single button and it all goes out." He looked at Ripley. "Ripley? Would you like to do the honors?"

"Oh *absolutely*," she answered acidly.

"Give me the signal, I'll open the channel," Perry said.

Taking a moment to compose herself, Ripley nodded, and Perry punched the transmit button. "This is Ellen Ripley speaking, representing the families of the colonists of LV-426 addressing Weyland-Yutani. I know you can hear us, so don't insult my intelligence by maintaining radio silence. There are women and children here, innocent people you are about to kill. You should know there will be severe consequences if your attack is not halted immediately.

"We are in possession of unaltered records and video files from the colony on LV-426 and the *Sulaco* as well as internal company files that directly implicate Weyland-Yutani in serious crimes, such as murder, attempted murder, manslaughter, negligence, industrial espionage, conspiracy to violate ICC quarantine on multiple occasions, violations of biological weapons treaties and fraud. These documents have been placed on an encrypted server beyond the company's control and they will be uploaded to the global data network where everyone will be able to view them.

"I am transmitting a sample of the documents in our possession; you have five minutes to authenticate them. After that they become public. It's time for a discussion." She fell silent as everyone in the room waited for a response, staring at the speaker in the overhead control panel.

No response came.

Uneasily, Hicks glanced at Williams, who watched the console, his jaw set in a mask of determination. Fresh tears shone in Carson's eyes. The others seemed to be holding their breath.

Ripley said firmly, "Two minutes."

No response.

"One minute before these documents are uploaded to the global data network."

Silence.

She sighed, deeply disappointed. After everything she had endured, it would end like this. "Have it your way. If we're going to die, we're going to make it as painful for you as possible." She looked down at Perry and was about to nod when there was a burst of static from the speaker on the console.

"Ripley? This is Eugene McMaster, head of Weyland internal security; we met at the inquest. I apologize for the delay in responding; I would like to be sure that we are communicating in good faith."

Ripley's voice dripped with contempt. "You are not in a position to lecture *anyone* about good faith, McMaster."

"Point taken," came the brisk, professional reply. "I just want to make sure we are both on the same page. I need to know if the documents you have uploaded have been distributed or shared."

"Not yet, but all it takes is a single keystroke, and there's nothing you can do to stop it."

"I understand. That material *cannot* be made public under any circumstances, so name your terms."

Without hesitation, she responded, "First, you will withdraw the armed people that are preparing to murder the men, women and children in this building."

"Done." McMaster answered promptly. "What else?"

"Not so fast." she snapped, glancing down at Perry, who looked up and nodded.

Satisfied, she continued. "You will lavishly - and I mean *lavishly* - compensate the families of the colonists on a monthly basis in perpetuity for the losses they have suffered. They are to be made financially secure, since their family members can no longer provide for them. You will do the same for the families of the Colonial Marines who went to LV-426. You will buy out Rebecca's and my interest in the Jordens' apartment, at above market rate, so that I can take Rebecca to a place you cannot find us."

"I can live with that. I'm assuming there are more demands."

"You assume correctly." she answered darkly. "You will immediately cease harassment and surveillance of all colonists' families. They will not be followed, and any eavesdropping devices installed in their homes will be removed. Likewise, you will not look for me after I disappear, and you will not try to monitor my whereabouts or activities. Not only that, but you will use your influence with the military to protect Colonel Jerome Williams and Corporal Dwayne Hicks from any reprisals. They are not to be touched."

McMaster sounded doubtful. "Ripley, Weyland Yutani is a private corporation. We don't have authority to dictate-

"Save it." she interrupted savagely. "There are plenty of transmissions between your office and high ranking military officials in these documents, so spare me your lies. You have a *lot* of influence with the military, McMaster; you will use it to protect these men who have suffered greatly from the company's actions.

"I have one final demand, and this is absolutely non-negotiable. I understand you have too much invested to completely abandon development of LV-426. However, you will cease all attempts to collect alien creatures from that derelict spaceship, and you will quarantine a wide area around it. Take whatever steps are necessary, but from this point forward that ship is now completely off limits to *everyone*."

There was a long silence. After several minutes, Ripley said, "McMaster? Are you reading me?"

"I read you Ripley," McMaster answered. He sounded more grudging now. "How do we know that you won't release the information anyway, or just come back to us later with more demands?"

"The same way we'll know you're going to live up to your end of the agreement. Mutual self-interest. You have a lot to lose if this information becomes public. The names of high-level

executives are in these documents; yours figures prominently. We want to be left alone and compensated for our losses.”

“The families are all on board? How do we know they won't start stirring up trouble?”

Ripley glanced up at Huxley, who nodded grimly. She said, “The colonists will support the conditions of the settlement.”

McMaster didn't immediately reply. After a couple of moments, she added, “I should also tell you that this conversation is being recorded, and will also be shared as well.”

More silence passed. Finally McMaster said, “Lieutenant Ripley...your terms are acceptable.” Amid the hushed sighs of relief from the others, he continued, “Designate a representative for the families so that we can draw up the agreement and make arrangements for compensation.”

“His name is Huxley,” Ripley said, glancing at him. Huxley nodded curtly.

McMasters said, “This is going to be a tough sell for members of the board, but in light of the information you have I think I can convince them to go along.”

“Well you better find a way, because we are *deadly* serious about this. And there will be people you don't know about who have copies of these documents. If you start backsliding it all comes out.”

“I completely understand. And Ripley, for what it's worth, I just want to say that despite-”

She turned to Perry and made a slashing motion across her throat; he terminated the connection, cutting McMaster off mid-sentence. She breathed an enormous, pent-up sigh of relief. She had had no idea what the company's response would be, and she didn't realize until this moment how badly frightened she had been. Turning to Huxley, she said, “Well, you're going to have to convince the families to go along. It's up to you now.”

He nodded, looking deep in thought. Carson came over to him. “What..what will you tell them?”

He ran a hand over his mouth and after several moments responded, “I'm going to tell them that the company isn't at fault. That there was a flaw in the processing station and the explosion was an accident.”

She looked stunned. “*What...??*”

Hicks stepped forward. “No, he's right. If they knew the whole truth they would want revenge. No amount of money would be enough.”

Carson looked horrified. “But-”

“It's the only way.” Ripley interjected. “Knowing about the aliens, the way they died and the company's actions won't bring anyone back. All it will do is increase their suffering.”

Huxley took Carson by the shoulders. “Rachel, they would start telling other people what really happened, and if the company starts thinking we're not holding up our end they'll have no incentive to back off. This is the only way to keep everyone safe.”

“It's true.” Williams added thoughtfully, and Carson turned to look at him, her eyes wide with disbelief. “A fault in the atmospheric processing station is something they will comprehend. Tragic, but understandable. Colonization is filled with risks, and they all knew that when they signed on.”

Carson looked frustrated, but after considering it, she nodded. “I'm afraid you're right. It just seems so wrong to let the company off the hook like this.”

“At least this way the families get compensation and are left alone. They’ll think the company was so heavy handed because they were trying to keep a lid on things until they found out what went wrong. They’ll understand *that*, and eventually accept it. What they *won’t* accept is the much uglier truth. It has to be this way.”

He looked up at the others, his expression dark. “I need everyone in this room to take a vow of silence. What really happened goes no further than us. Our lives *depend* on it. Is everyone clear on this?”

No one spoke.

“What’s the definition of compromise?” Williams asked them. “Nobody gets everything they want.”

The other people in the room nodded unhappily, murmuring their assent. Huxley sighed and said, “Well, I better go tell them.” He turned and walked out of the room.

Williams and Hicks moved over to Ripley as the others talked quietly among themselves. Hicks was looking at Ripley with open admiration. “Not bad,” he said with the lopsided grin she had grown so fond of. “Not bad at all. You never cease to amaze me.”

She forced a smile. “Uploading the documents was your idea, Jerome. You saved us all.”

Williams nodded glumly. “All we’ve done is bought us some time. The truth will come out eventually.”

“By the time that happens Newt and I will be far away from this place.” Ripley answered firmly.

Hicks looked as if he was trying to find the right words to say something; with a cautious smile he asked, “Wherever it is you’re going, do you think there might be room for a slightly used ex-marine?”

Ripley smiled warmly in return, and was surprised to feel herself blushing. “Yes, Dwayne. I believe so.”

Epilogue

“Welcome to the evening news update, and at the top of the news, a stunning development from Weyland Yutani. In a press conference this afternoon, spokesperson Daria McGovern announced a major disaster at one of its off-world terraforming colonies, on the planet Acheron, otherwise known as LV-426. Acheron is one of three known moons orbiting the planet Calpamos in the Zeta Reticuli system, thirty-nine light years from Earth.”

The camera angle changed and the polished news anchor gazed soberly at the camera, reading the scrolling type. “Weyland Yutani had established a colony there, with a network of atmospheric processors designed to convert the environment into one more hospitable to humans. The company announced today that a flaw in the station’s heat exchangers caused the facility to explode, completely destroying the colony and its inhabitants. The death toll stands at one hundred and fifty-eight people. This is a breaking development; we go live now to the press conference.”

The news feed switched to a woman wearing an expensive suit standing behind a podium with Weyland Yutani's logo on the front. She had a short, severe head of hair, a single string of pearls and flawless makeup. In a bland voice she was reading from an obviously prepared statement.

"...until further investigation is complete. It will be some time before a thorough analysis of the site can be conducted due to the extremely high radiation levels present. For that reason, all access to Acheron in general, and that region in particular is now strictly prohibited."

In an almost bored voice, she continued. "Weyland Yutani wishes to express its profound condolences to the families of the brave colonists who dedicated their lives to mankind's advancement. While we all know the hazards of space exploration, that does not lessen the pain when our efforts to reach for the stars causes loss of life. Weyland Yutani is a family, and our employees and contractors are our most precious resource. This loss affects us all, and we want to assure the families that they will be provided for financially because of this disaster. Taking care of our people is what Weyland Yutani is all about; we simply can't turn our backs on the families of these brave men and women. I will now entertain questions..."

■ ■ ■

"...and now to business news. In a follow up on the destruction of Weyland-Yutani's colony on Acheron, announced by the company last week, the company made some personnel changes. The head of internal security, Eugene McMaster, is being let go for unspecified reasons, with the company declining to offer specifics.

"McMaster was one of the top executives at the company, responsible for internal security and the administration of the company's colony projects. When reached at home, he declined to comment and hung up on a reporter. The company, in a statement, insisted that the move had no connection with Weyland's sinking stock price, which had been on a downward trend since the announcement of the disaster last week.

"When asked if the Acheron colony was connected to a rumored secret bioweapons program the company had been developing, a company spokesman declined to comment."

■ ■ ■

"Can you hand me the garlic press, Ellen?"

Ellen Ripley handed it to the woman who stood at the kitchen counter, dissecting a clove of garlic. To everyone who now knew her, she was Ellen, and this just seemed right. Being known solely by her last name was an impersonal vestige of her old life, a life of spaceships, rank, shipmates and company employees. A life of long hours in deep space, confrontations and unwanted intrigue. It was time to retire her last name as her primary identity.

The woman at the kitchen counter with the garlic press was tall and thin, in her mid sixties, with medium length silver-white hair that came to the collar of the white blouse she wore. Her eyes were green and twinkled with intelligence and good humor, highlighting a well proportioned, heart-shaped face. She had an air of vibrant confidence balanced by a healthy dose of empathy. With practiced care she inserted a clove into the garlic press and her nimble fingers squeezed the handle.

Ellen finished slicing the onion and used the carving knife to scrape the rings into the skillet. The onion slices hissed indignantly, mingling with the other vegetables. She used the spatula to mix up the ingredients and took another sip of wine.

"Still happy you and Newt moved in?" Claire Williams asked, squeezing more garlic. She glanced over with a cautious smile.

Ellen smiled back. "We love it here. Newt especially. She really sees you and Jerome as grandparents."

Claire's smile deepened, with a slight trace of relief. "I'm so glad to hear that. Jerome absolutely *loves* that little girl. I do too. She came along just when we needed her, after our...well, after what happened." A shadow of anguish crossed her face.

Ellen looked out the window above the kitchen sink to the backyard, where Dwayne, Jerome Williams and Newt were playing a game of three way catch with battered baseball mitts. The yard was large, and there were no other occupied properties in the vicinity, just open fields and vacant lots. It was a town out of time, a place that had been bypassed by technology, a town that had emptied out due to lack of economic opportunities. There were no large video screens, air cars were rare, and no artificial persons. The few people who still lived here did so out of a sense of sheer necessity, having nowhere else to go, forming a tight-knit community as a result.

It was exactly the kind of place Ellen had been looking for.

"I know how terrible it was for you, losing Audra." she said quietly. She sipped some more wine. "I'll be honest with you, Claire, I've come to look upon you and Jerome as not only my best friends, but as...well, as the parents I never had."

Claire's eyes were shiny and she wiped one quickly. "Stop, Ellen, you're going to make me shed a tear, and *then* where would I be...??" They laughed together.

It had been six months since Ellen, Dwayne and Newt had packed up the Jorden's apartment and left the city. Jerome had encouraged them to move to his hometown, where he and his wife Claire maintained a large Victorian house. "I can help you find a place to live and get settled," Jerome had explained. "You'd have someone to turn to if you need help."

With nowhere else to go, it seemed like the best option, and she and Dwayne had begun renting a modest house in town, where they spent a lot of time with Jerome and his wife Claire, who were delighted with Newt from their first meeting. The people in town were open and friendly, and blissfully free of the avarice and duplicity Ellen had become so familiar with. It was a quiet town, with not a lot to do, which suited all three of them just fine, and they began homeschooling Newt.

They found themselves spending so much time with the Williams that one evening, over another excellent dinner prepared by Claire, Jerome had floated the idea of them moving into the house.

"Claire and I would love to have you here," he explained, "and there are certainly enough rooms in this big house for all of us. And, we wouldn't even charge you rent."

"We wouldn't *dream* of charging you rent." Claire agreed firmly. "You are family. Seriously, please think it over."

Which is what Ellen and Dwayne did. Over several long conversations on the front porch of their rented home, overlooking their quiet town, they discussed it, and finally agreed that it seemed like the right move to make.

The large house, which had been in Jerome's family for generations, had several unused rooms. One for Newt, one for Ellen and Dwayne, their own private bathroom and a separate entrance. There was a large attached garage in which Jerome and Dwayne had bonded while working on their various projects. Jerome had introduced Dwayne to imported cigars and to Ellen's mild dismay, Dwayne had come to enjoy them immensely. He and Jerome would spend evenings on the front porch, smoking cigars and talking about various things.

Ellen, meanwhile, had become close to Claire, who had a nurturing, lively personality, and the two of them had come to enjoy each other's company a great deal. They both had lost daughters, giving them a shared bond. Newt loved the entire arrangement; she was constantly being spoiled by Jerome and Claire and had gained the stability she so desperately needed. The friction and difficult adjustment period Ellen had expected had never come.

Ellen had realized that she had fallen in love with Dwayne. She was still trying to get her mind around caring so much for a man again, after so many years of independence, working among men who still harbored suspicions that women couldn't cut it, and having to constantly project strength and hiding anything which indicated weakness. Dwayne had been endlessly patient as she learned to open herself up to him, and even express her long-dormant feminine side. It had been a steep learning curve, but she had felt no regrets.

She had heard through the various sources that the truth about LV-426 was beginning to come out, as she had known it would, and the company was furiously trying to tamp down uncomfortable questions about its efforts to develop its bioweapons programs, with steadily declining success. She had not made any effort to follow these developments; that was another life, and she found she simply no longer cared.

Ellen began to place plates on the table, reflecting that she had a family now. The novelty had not worn off, and she hoped it never would. She and Newt had formed an inseparable bond, almost as if they shared a psychic connection. Newt was taller and more confident now, and had proven to be incredibly smart. She had expressed interest more than a few times in being an architect or a botanist.

"Tonight we celebrate." Claire said with a smile. "Can you let them know we're ready to eat? I made Newt's favorite dessert."

Ellen opened the back door and called out, "Dinner's ready!"

Jerome, Newt and Dwayne looked over to the house. "Hope you have an appetite, kiddo," Dwayne said, throwing an arm around Newt's shoulders as they began to walk toward the house. Jerome fell into step beside them.

"Do you think we'll be able to go to the ball game this weekend?" Newt asked hopefully.

"On one condition: you have to help me eat the hot dogs." Dwayne answered with a sly look.

She wrinkled her nose with distaste. "To see them play," she answered with dramatic resignation, "it's worth it."

"But tonight, Newt, is a *special* night." Jerome said, beaming.

She looked mystified. "It *is*...? Why?"

"It's been one month since you moved in and we all became a family." Jerome took her hand as they walked.

"That's right," Dwayne said, giving her a wink. "And I think Claire made your favorite dessert."

Her eyes widened. "Apple pie...??"

"Just leave some for me." Dwayne answered. The three of them entered the house and shut the door on another setting sun.

The End