

Ash was absolutely fascinated by the amount of items that were being brought up from the core. There were specimens of various flora and fauna, as well as core samples from the land masses that were making up the traversable areas on the Core Planet. Someone had even managed to bring up a sample of pure ichor, which was currently sitting in a locked case until Ripley could be convinced to let anyone take a closer look at it.

It was amazing to Ash that Ripley had so much influence on the people of Paradise Rock. The green and black nautipod lived off on his own in a shack far off from the rest of the town, and yet whenever Ripley came around people noticed him. They listened to him, and they didn't question his orders when they were given. Ash had known Ripley from before, when they were working as spacers on the Parallax. Ash knew Ripley, but the Ripley he'd known had been far less comfortable with barking orders and having people listen to him. Now, Ripley didn't even seem to register the odd fact that when he spoke up people listened to him. He just seemed to accept it as a matter of fact. This Ripley had the confidence of a Captain that Ash's memory of Ripley never had.

It was all terribly attractive. Ash wasn't sure how else to say it. This older, harsher, more jaded Ripley was mesmerizing in a way he couldn't put into words. It didn't hurt that he'd grown since the last time they'd seen each other. He was certainly too skinny (and he obviously didn't take care of himself the way he needed to) but Ripley had grown several inches since Ash had last seen him. Ash had a feeling if Ripley ate the way he was supposed to and took better care of himself he'd not only get taller, but he'd fill out in bulk as well. So, naturally, Ash had taken over making their meals and forcing Ripley to eat more regularly. It was just because he was concerned for his friend and his health, not because the thought of Ripley with some bulk and muscles on him made Ash feel a bit weak in the knees. Certainly not.

Ash was examining one of the flora samples. A branch made of a pale, hard wood-like substance that had apparently come from one of the strange plant-like growths on the planet's surface. One of the adventurers had quickly sketched the plant, but Ash was frustrated by the basic nature of the sketch. It was a bit too amateurish to really make out any real detail. The sketch wasn't usable, and the clipping was unfortunately not enough to get a real feel for how the plant actually looked in the wild. Ash heard a noise from the door of the Research room and he looked up to see Ripley walking in, the other Nautipod looking haggard as always.

"I can't believe people are *still* going down to the surface, despite the risks," Ripley immediately began to complain, one of the hands of his tentacles throwing around in the air at a rapid pace. "Basalt barely survived the last Diving trip he took when that Ichor beast tried to snatch the ship out of the air. And yet, they're still insisting on going. It's like everyone around here has gone insane! There is no treasure down there. There's nothing worth dying for down on that damned planet."

"People who are desperate will do a lot for the promise of security, love," Ash says, taking his magnifying lenses off his face to better look at Ripley's face.

"No, it's because those companies are dangling the idea of there being some great buried treasure down on the surface world. Everything was destroyed in the Fracturing. Anything down there is destroyed as well, or corrupted by the Ichor. It's all smokescreen so they can get us to be cannon fodder while they try to profit off of whatever is brought back," Ripley says with a dark look, his expression moody as he throws himself into a chair next to Ash. Ash just sighs, not wanting to make Ripley any more upset than he already is, but he just can't stop himself.

"Well, it is fascinating, don't you think?" Ripley's eyes widen in shock so Ash plows on, not wanting to let the other nautipod go off on a tangent before he can explain. "I mean, it's a whole new ecosystem that's grown in less than the span of a year! There are new plants, new creatures, even the minerals are different from the ones we're used to. We're seeing deposits of minerals that we've never seen before on Skire, and that *shouldn't* happen! It's just... it makes you wonder what the heck is going on down there. It makes you want to see it for yourself... doesn't it?" Ash's voice is sheepish as he watches Ripley's expression go from shocked to angry, to downright furious in the span of a few seconds as he continues to speak.

"You are *not* going down there, Ash," Ripley says when Ash trails off. The gray and white nautipod winces at his friend's tone, harsh and biting.

"I just meant that it.." Ash tries to explain, but Ripley cuts him off again.

"No, I don't want to hear it. It's bad enough that I'm letting you look at all of this stuff, it's putting all these ideas into your head. But I'll be damned if I let you go down to that planet, Ash," Ripley's voice is a low growl, his yellow eyes slitted as he pokes a finger into Ash's plated chest.

"Now, just a moment," Ash says, trying to summon what dignity he can, "I'm a grown pod. I don't need you telling me what I can and cannot do. You're not my keeper, Ripley." Ripley's glare nearly makes Ash quake in his shell, but he knows he can't let the other pod's aggressive behavior intimidate him. Ripley had no right to tell Ash he can't go down to the planet. He is not a child. He can decide for himself whether or not he wants to take that risk.

"You're not going, and that's final. I'm not arguing with you on this," Ripley says, standing so quickly the stool he was sitting on falls to the ground with a crash, making Ash wince again.

"You don't get to speak to me like that," Ash insists, remaining seated where he is. His stomach is curled up in knots, but realistically he knows a lot of Ripley's anger stems from the fact that he is terrified of the Core Planet and the Ichor Beasts down below. Ripley hisses out an angry noise, moving forward to grab Ash's arm with his blackened arm and wrenching him up from where he's sitting.

"I said I'm not arguing about this, Ash!" he yells, his voice growing louder as his anger boils over. "I am *not* letting you go down there and get yourself killed like an idiot." Ash freezes as Ripley's hand grips his wrist so hard he can feel his shell creaking under the pressure of his

fingers. Ripley's face is twisted into an angry grimace, but as Ash freezes and looks down at where his hand is scratching deep grooves into the armor of his forearm.

"You're hurting me, Ripley," Ash says, his voice quiet after Ripley's raised and furious yelling.

Ripley's eyes fall in shock, only noticing how his claws have cut into the hard shell of Ash's arm so easily he barely noticed. The speed with which Ripley releases him causes Ash to almost fall back, but he catches himself with a small hitch of breath. The gray nautipod clutches his arm to his chest, rubbing fingers over the grooves Ripley's claws left in his carapace.

"I'm not... I didn't..." Ripley says as Ash takes a step back and examines the superficial injuries to his shell.

"If I want to go to the surface, Ripley, I will go," Ash interrupts the other nautipod's fumbling, his expression level. "And there's nothing you can do to stop me. We are friends, but that doesn't give you the right to dictate to me what I can and cannot do. I'm not a child, and you are not in charge of me." Ash isn't surprised when Ripley's face falls, his mouth curving into a sharp downward scowl as his fists clench tight at his sides. Ash doesn't wait for Ripley to reply though, he doesn't want this to turn into a fight. So instead he turns from his friend, placing his notes down on the table with exaggerated care and walks to the door.

Ripley watches Ash go, holding his tongue despite wanting to call Ash back and explain. Ripley just doesn't have the words right now, his tongue feeling heavy and leaden in his mouth with unsaid things. Nothing he says will make a difference anyway. Ash won't listen to Ripley, no matter how much he yells or throws things about. Ash had always been a stubborn pod, Ripley used to admire him for that. Now it just fills Ripley with anxiety, knowing that Ash is thinking about going down to the surface. Because Ripley knows that nothing good will come of Ash going down to the surface of that cursed planet. And Ripley knows too that if Ash goes down there he won't be going alone. There's no way in heaven or hell that Ripley would let Ash go down there alone.

And that thought terrifies Ripley more than anything.